Harlequin® Romance

MARION LENNOX

Abby and the Bachelor Cop

Where lost dogs heal lonely heartsâ¦

Marion Lennox brings you two wonderfully warm, witty, emotional and uplifting stories with happy endings youâll never forget.

Step into Banskia Bay, a picturesque seaside town where hearts are made whole and dreams really can come true! With the help of a few mischievous little dogs, two couples get together and find that they are in for journeys they had never expectedâ¦.

Abby and the Bachelor Cop

Lawyer and bride-to-be Abigail Callahan has her life mapped out. Then gorgeous bad-boy-turned-cop Raff Finn reenters Abbyâs life, landing her with an adorable homeless dog called Kleppy and a whole lot of troubleâ¦.

Misty and the Single Dad

Teacher Misty has aspirations to leave Banksia Bay, but then Nicholas Holt, tall, dark and deliciously bronzed, turns up in her classroom with his adorable little son, Bailey, and an injured stray spaniel in tow. Soon Misty has to make a choice: follow her dreamsâ¦or her heart?

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Dear Reader,

As I write my books, I work with what Edith Wharton described as âa heartbeat at my feet.â Mitzi is totally devoted. Sheâs often smelly, sheâs sometimes scratchy and sheâs occasionally impatient. She doesnât understand that I need to finish the next sceneâshe wants walks. If you ask if I could write without a dog at my feet, Iâll confess Iâve never tried. Before Mitzi, there was Harry. Before Harry, Chloe, Pete, Radar, Busterâ¦

So finally, after years of writing *with* dogs, Iâve decided to write *about* dogs. Dogs Iâve known. Dogs Iâve loved. Only the names have been changed, to protect the not so innocent.

Kleppy is a kleptomaniac, a fabulous thieving dog. Living with him is a roller coaster of a ride, always keeping just one tail length from the law. But he charms my lovely heroine, lawyer Abigail Callahan, into rescuing him, and shows her how to follow her heart right into the arms of the man she hasnât dared to loveâgorgeous cop Raff Finn.

Welcome to Banksia Bay, where lost dogs heal lonely hearts! Kleppy is the first of many. Enjoy.

Marion Lennox

MARION LENNOX

Abby and the Bachelor Cop

TORONTO NEW YORK LONDON
AMSTERDAM PARIS SYDNEY HAMBURG
STOCKHOLM ATHENS TOKYO MILAN MADRID
PRAGUE WARSAW BUDAPEST AUCKLAND

Marion Lennox is a country girl, born on an Australian dairy farm. She moved onâmostly because the cows just werenât interested in her stories! Married to a âvery special doctor,â Marion writes for the Medical Romance and Harlequin Romance lines. (She used a different name for each category for a whileâreaders looking for her past Mills & Boon Harlequin Romance novels should search for author Trisha David, as well.) Sheâs now had more than seventy-five romance novels accepted for publication.

In her non-writing life Marion cares for kids, cats, dogs, chickens and goldfish. She travels, she fights her rampant garden (sheâs losing) and her house dust (sheâs lost).

Having spun in circles for the first part of her life, sheâs now stepped back from her âotherâ career, which was teaching statistics at her local university. Finally sheâs reprioritized her life, figured whatâs important and discovered the joys of deep baths, romance and chocolate.

Preferably all at the same time!

With huge thanks to the wonderful Kelly Hunter, who gave me Kleppy, to the fabulous Anne Gracie, and to all the Maytoners, whose friendships bring my stories to life.

To Radar, who was Trouble. I look back on every moment with laughter and with love

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CHAPTER ONE

IF YOU couldnât be useful at the scene of an accident, you should leave. Onlookers only caused trouble.

Banksia Bayâs Animal Welfare van had been hit from behind. Dogs were everywhere. People were yelling at each other. Esther Ford was having hysterics.

Abigail Callahan, however, had been travelling at a safe enough distance to avoid the crash. Sheâd managed to stop before her little red sports car hit anything, and sheâd done all she could.

Sheâd checked no one was hurt. Sheâd hugged Esther, sheâd tried to calm her down and sheâd phoned Estherâs son who, she hoped, might be better at coping with hysterics than she was. Sheâd carried someoneâs crumpled fender to the side of the road. Sheâd even tried to catch a dog. Luckily, sheâd failed. She wasnât good with dogs.

Now, blessedly, Emergency Services had arrived. Banksia Bay Emergency Services took the shape of Rafferty Finn, local cop, so it was definitely time for Abby to leave.

Stay away from Raff Finn.

It wasnât past history making her go. She was doing the right thing.

She tried to back her car so she could turn, but the crowd of onlookers was blocking her way. She touched her horn and Raff glared at her.

How else could she make people move? She did not need to be here. She looked down at her briefcase and thought about the notes inside that she knew had to be in courtânow. Then she glanced back at Raff and she thoughtâ¦ She thoughtâ¦

She thought Rafferty Finn looked toe-curlingly sexy.

Which was ridiculous.

Abby had fallen for Raff when she was eight. It was more than time she was over it. She *was* over it. She was so over it she was engaged to be married. To Philip.

When Raff had been ten years old, which was when Abby had developed her first crush on him, heâd been skinny, freckled and his red hair had spiked straight up. Twenty years on, skinny had given way to tall, tanned and ripped. His thick curls had darkened to burned copper, and his freckles had merged to an all-over tan. His gorgeous green eyes, with dangerous mischief lurking within, had the capacity to make her catch her breath.

But right now it was his uniform that was causing problems. His uniform was enough to make a girl go right back to feeling as she had at eight years old.

Raff was directing drivers. He was calm, authoritative and far more sexy than any man had a right to be.

âHenrietta, hold that Dalmatian before it knocks Mrs Ford over. Roger, quit yelling at Mrs Ford. You drove into the dog van, not Mrs Ford, and it doesnât make a bit of difference that she was going too slow. Back your Volvo up and get it off the road.â

Do not look at Raff Finn, she told herself. Do not.

The man is trouble.

She turned and tried again to reverse her car. Why wouldnât people move?

Someone was thumping on her window. The door of her car swung open. She swivelled and her heart did a back flip. Raff was standing over herâsix foot two of lethal cop. With dog.

âI need your help, Abby,â he growled and, before she could react, there was a dog in her car. On her knees.

âI need you to take him to the vet,â Raff said. âNow.â

The vet?

The local veterinary clinic was half a mile away, on the outskirts of town.

But she wasnât given a chance to argue. Raff slammed her car door closed and started helping Mrs Ford steer to the kerb.

There was a dog on her knee.

Abbyâs grandmother had once owned a shortbread tin adorned with a picture of a dog called Greyfriars Bobby. According to legendâor GranâBobby was famous for guarding his masterâs grave for almost fourteen years through the bleakest of Edinburghâs winters. This dog looked his twin. He was smallish but not a toy. His coat was wiry and a bit scruffy, sort of sand-

coloured. One of his ears was a bit floppy.

His eyebrows were too long.

Did dogs have eyebrows?

He looked up at her as if he was just as stunned as she was.

What was wrong with him? Why did he need to go to the vet?

He wasnât bleeding.

She was due in court in ten minutes. Help.

What to do with a dog?

She put a hand on his head and gave him a tentative pat. Very tentative. If she moved him, maybe sheâd hurt him. Maybe heâd hurt her.

He wiggled his head to the side and she tried scratching behind his ear. That seemed to be appreciated. His eyes were huge, brown and limpid. He had a raggedy tail and he gave it a tentative wag.

His eyes didnât leave hers. His eyes wereâ¦wereâ¦

Letâs cut out the emotion here, she told herself hastily. This dog is nothing to do with you.

She fumbled under the dog for the door catch and climbed out of the car. The dogâs backside sort of slumped as she lifted him. Actually, both ends slumped.

She carried him back to Raff. The little dog looked up at her and his tail still wagged. It seemed a half-hearted wag, as if he wasnât at all sure where he was but he sort of hoped things might be okay.

She felt exactly the same.

Raff was back in the middle of the crashed cars. âRaff, I canâtâ¦â she called.

Raff had given up trying to get Mrs Ford to steer. He had hold of her steering wheel and was steering himself, pushing at the same time, moving the car to the kerb all by himself. âCanât what?â he demanded.

âI canât take this dog anywhere.â

âHenrietta says itâs okay,â Raff snapped. âItâs the only one sheâs caught. Sheâs trying to round up the others. Come on, Abby, the roadâs clearâhow hard is this? Just take him to the vet.â

âIâm due in court in ten minutes.â

âSo am I.â Raff shoved Mrs Fordâs car another few feet and then paused for breath. âIf you think Iâve spent years getting

Wallace Baxter behind bars, just to see you and your prissy boyfriend get him off because I canât make itâ¦â

âCut it out, Raff.â

âCut what out?â

âHeâs not prissy,â she snapped. âAnd heâs not my boyfriend. You know heâs my fiancÃ©.â

âYour fiancÃ©. I stand corrected. But heâs definitely prissy. Iâll bet heâs sitting in court right now, in his smart suit and silk tieânot like me, out here getting my hands dirty. Case for the prosecutionâme and the time I can spare after work. Case for the defenceâyou and Philip and weeks of paid preparation. Two lawyers against one cop.â

âThereâs the Crown Prosecutorâ¦â

âWhoâs eighty. Who sleeps instead of listening. Thisâll be a no-brainer, even if you donât show.â He shoved the car a bit further. âBut Iâll be there, whether you like it or not. Meanwhile, take the dog to the vetâs.â

âYouâre saying you want me to take the dog to the vetâsâto keep me out of court?â

âIâm saying take the dog to the vetâs because thereâs no one else,â he snapped. âYour carâs the only one still roadworthy. Iâll radio Justice Weatherby to ask for a half hour delay. Thatâll get us both there on time. Get to the vetâs and get back.â

âBut I donât do dogs,â she wailed. âRaffâ¦â

âYou donât want to get your suit dirty?â

âThatâs not fair. This isnât about my suit.â Or not very. âItâs justâ¦ Whatâs wrong with him? I meanâ¦ I canât look after him. What if he bites?â

Raff sighed. âHe wonât bite,â he said, speaking to her as if she were eight years old again. âHeâs a pussycat. His nameâs Kleppy. Heâs Isaac Abrahamsâ Cairn Terrier and heâs on his way to be put down. Put him on your passenger seat and Fredâll take him out at the other end. All Iâm asking you to do is deliver him.â

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It was twelve minutes to ten on a beautiful morning in Banksia Bay. The sun was warm on her face. The sea was glittering beyond the harbour and the mountain behind the town was blue with the haze of a still autumn morning. The sounds of the traffic

chaos were lessening as Raffâs attempts at restoring order took effect.

Abby stood motionless, her arms full of dog, and Raffâs words replayed in her head.

Heâs Isaac Abrahamsâ Cairn Terrier and heâs on his way to be put down.

She knew Isaac or, rather, sheâd known him. The old man had lived a mile or so out of town, up on Black Mountain whereâ¦well, where she didnât go any more. Isaac had died six weeks ago and she was handling probate. Isaacâs daughter in Sydney had been into the office a couple of times, busy and efficient in her disposing of Isaacâs belongings.

Thereâd been no talk of a dog.

âCan you get your car off the road?â Raff said. âYouâre blocking traffic.â

She was blocking traffic? But she gazed around and realised she was.

Somehow, magically, Raff had every other car to the side of the road. Raff was like that. He ordered and people obeyed. There were a couple of tow trucks arriving but already cars could get through.

There was no problem. All she had to do was get in the carâwith dogâand drive to the vetâs.

Butâ¦to take a dog to be put down?

âHenrietta should do this,â she said, looking round for the lady she knew ran the Animal Shelter. But Raff put his hands on his cop hips and she thought any minute now heâd get ugly.

âHenrietta has a van full of dogs to find,â he snapped.

âBut she runs the Animal Shelter.â

âSo?â

âSo thatâs where he needs to go. Surely not to be put down.â

Raffâs face hardened. She knew that look. Life hadnât been easy for Raffâshe knew that, too. When he was up against itâ¦well, he did what he had to do.

âAbby, I know this dogâIâve known him for years,â he told her, and his voice was suddenly bleak. âI took him to the Animal Shelter the night Isaac died. His daughter doesnât want him and neither does anyone else. The only guy who loves him is Isaacâs gardener, and Lionel lives in a rooming house. Thereâs no way he can keep him. The Shelterâs full to bursting. Kleppyâs had six

weeks and the Shelter canât keep him any longer. Fredâs waiting. The injection will be quick. Donât drag it out, Abby. Deliver the dog, and Iâll see you in court.â

âButâ¦â

âJust do it.â And he turned his back on her and started directing tow trucks.

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Heâd just given Abigail Callahan a dog and she looked totally flummoxed.

She looked adorable.

Yeah, well, it was high time he stopped thinking Abby was adorable. As a teenager, Abby had seemed a piece of himâa part of his wholeâbut sheâd watched him with condemnation for ten years now. Sheâd changed from the laughing kid she used to beâfrom his adoring shadowâto someone he no longer liked very much.

Heâd killed her brother.

Raff had finally come to terms with that long-ago tragedyâor heâd accepted it as much as he ever couldâbut heâd killed a part of her. How did a man get past that?

It was time he accepted that he never could.

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What sort of name was Kleppy for a dog?

He shouldnât have told her its name.

Only she would have figured it. The dog had a blue plastic collar, obviously standard Animal Welfare issue, but whoever had attached it had reattached his tag, as if they were leaving him a bit of personality to the end.

Kleppy.

The name had been scratched by hand on the back of what looked like a medal. Abby set the dog on her passenger seatâhe wagged his tail again and turned round twice and settledâand she couldnât help turning over his tag.

It was a medal. She recognised it and stared.

Old Man Abrahams had done something pretty impressive in the war. Sheâd heard rumours but sheâd never had confirmation.

This was more than confirmation. A medal of honour, an amazing medal of honourâhanging on the collar of a scruffy,

homeless mutt called Kleppy.

Uh-oh. He was looking up at her again now. His brown eyes were huge.

Six weeks in the Animal Shelter. Sheâd gone there once on some sort of school excursion. Concrete cells with a tiny exercise yard. Too many dogs, gazing up at her with hope she couldnât possibly match.

âThe people who run this do a wonderful job,â she remembered her teacher saying. âBut they canât save every dog. If you ask your parents for a pet for Christmas you need to understand a dog can live for twenty years. Every dog deserves a loving home, boys and girls.â

Sheâd been what? Thirteen? She remembered looking at the dogs and starting to cry.

And she also remembered Raffâof course it was Raffâpatting her awkwardly on the shoulder. âHey, itâs okay, Abby. Thereâll be a fairy godmother somewhere. I reckon all these dogsâll be claimed by tea time.â

âYeah, probably by your grandmother,â someone had said, not unkindly. âHow many dogs do you have, Finn?â

âSeven,â heâd said and the Welfare lady had pursed her lips.

âSee, thatâs the problem,â she said. âNo family should have more than two.â

âSo you ought to bring five in,â someone else told Raff and Raff had gone quiet.

You ought to bring five in. To be put down? Maybe that was what Philip would think, Abby decided, though she couldnât remember Philip being there. But even then Philip had been a stickler for rules.

As were her parents.

âWe donât want an abandoned dog,â theyâd said in horror that night all those years ago. âWhy would you want someone elseâs cast-off?â

She needed to remember her parentsâ advice right now, for Isaac Abrahamsâ cast-off was in her car. Wearing a medal of valour.

âMove the car, Abby.â Raffâs voice was inexorable. She glanced up and he was filling her windscreen.

âI donât wantâ¦â

âYou donât always get what you want,â he growled. âI

thought you were old enough to figure that out. While youâre figuring, shift the car.â

âButâ¦â

âOr Iâll get you towed for obstructing traffic,â he snapped. âNo choice, lady. Move.â

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So all she had to do was take one dog to the vetâs and get herself to court. How hard was that?

She drove and Kleppy stayed motionless on the passenger seat and looked at her. Looking as if he trusted her with his life.

She felt sick.

This wasnât her responsibility. Kleppy belonged to an old guy whoâd died six weeks ago. His daughter didnât want him. No one else had claimed him, so the sensible, humane thing to do was have him put down.

But what ifâ¦? What ifâ¦?

Oh, help, what she thinking?

She was getting married on Saturday week. To Philip.

Nine days.

Her tiny house was full of wedding presents. Her wedding gown was hanging in the hall, a vision of beaded ivory satin. Sheâd made it herself, every stitch. She loved that dress.

This dog would walk past it and sheâd have dog hair on ivory silkâ¦

Well, that was a dumb thing to think. For this dog to walk past it, heâd have to be in her house, and this dog was headed to the vetâs. To be put down.

He looked up at her and whimpered. His paw came out and touched her knee.

Her heart turned over. Nooooo.

It took five minutes to drive to the vetâs. Kleppyâs paw rested against her knee the whole time.

She pulled up. Kleppy wasnât shaking. She was.

Fred came out to meet her. The elderly vet looked grim. He went straight to the passenger door. Tugged it open.

âRaff rang to say you were coming,â he said, lifting Kleppy out. âThanks for bringing him. Do you know when the rest are coming?â

âIâ¦ Henrietta was trying to catch them. How many?â

âMore than I want to think about,â Fred said grimly. âThree months from Christmas, puppies stop being cute. Not your call, though. Iâll deal with him from here.â

Kleppy lay limp in Fredâs arms. He looked back at her.

The paw on her kneeâ¦

Help. Help, help, help.

âItâll be quick?â

Fred glanced at her, brows snapping. Abby had gone to school with Fredâs daughter. He knew her well. âDonât,â he said.

âDonât what?â

âThink about it. Get on with your life. Nine days till the wedding?â

âIâ¦yes.â

âThen youâve enough on your plate without worrying about stray dogs. Not that you and Philip would ever want a dog. Youâre not dog people.â

âWhatâ¦what do you mean?â

âDogs are mess,â he said. âNot your style. You guys might qualify for a goldfish. See you later, love. Happy wedding if I donât see you before.â

He turned away. She could no longer see Kleppy.

She could feel him.

His eyesâ¦

Help. Help, help, help.

She was a goldfish person? Sheâd never even had a goldfish.

A paw on her kneeâ¦

He reached the door before she broke.

âFred?â

The vet turned. Kleppy was still slumped.

âYes?â

âI canât bear this,â she said. âCan youâ¦can you take him in, check him out for damage and then give him back to me?â

âGive him back?â

âYes.â

âYou want him?â

âHeâs my wedding present to me.â She knew she sounded defiant but she didnât care. âIâve decided. How hard can one

dog be? I can do this. Kleppy is mine.â

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Fred did his best to dissuade her. âA dog is for life, Abigail. Small dogs like Kleppy live for sixteen years or longer. Thatâs ten years at least of keeping this dog.â

âYes.â But ten years? That was a fact to give her pause.

But the pawâ¦

âHeâs a mutt,â Fred said. âMostly Cairn but a bit of something else.â

âThatâs okay.â Her voice was better, she decided. Firmer. If she was adopting a stray, what use was a pedigree?

âWhat will Philip say?â

âPhilip will say Iâm crazy, but itâll be fine,â she said stoutly, though in truth she did have qualms. âIs he okay?â

Fred was checking him, even as he tried to dissuade her. âHe seems shocked, and heâs much thinner than when Isaac brought him in for his last vaccinations. My guess is that heâs barely eaten since the old man died. Isaac found him six years back, as a pup, dumped out in the bush. There were a few problems, but in the end they were pretty much inseparable.â

Inseparable? The word suddenly pushed her back to the scene sheâd just left. To Raff.

Once upon a time, she and Raff had been inseparable, she thought, and inexplicably there was a crazy twist of her heart.

Inseparable. This dog. The pawâ¦

âHe looks okay,â Fred said, feeding him a liver treat. Kleppy took it with dignified politeness. âJust deflated from what lifeâs done to him. So now what?â

âI take him home.â

âYouâll need food. Bedding. A decent chain.â

âIâll stop at the pet store. Tell me what to get.â

But Fred was glancing at his watch, looking anxious. âIâm urgently needed at a calving. Tell you what, youâll be seeing Raff again in court. Raffâll tell you what you need.â

âHow did you knowâ¦?â

âEveryone knows everything in Banksia Bay,â Fred said. âI know where youâre supposed to be right now. I know Raffâs had the case set back half an hour and I hear Judge Weatherbyâs not

happy. Heâs fed up with Raff though, not you, so chances are youâll get Baxter off. Which no one in Banksia Bay will be happy about. But hey, if your fees go toward buying dog food, then who am I to argue? Get Baxter off, then talk to Raff about dog food. He gets a discount at the Stock and Station store.â

âWhy?â

âBecause Raff has one pony, two dogs, three cats, two rabbits and, at last count, eighteen guinea pigs,â Fred said, handing her Kleppy and starting to clear up. âHis place is a menagerie. Itâs a wonder he didnât take this one but I guess even Raff has limits. He has a lot on his plate. See you later, love. Happy wedding and happy new dog.â

CHAPTER TWO

SHE couldnât go to the Stock and Station store now. Thatâd have to wait until sheâd talked to Raff. Still, Kleppy obviously needed something. What? Best guess.

She stopped at the supermarket and bought a water bowl, a nice red lead with pictures of balls on it and a marrowbone.

She drove to the courthouse and Kleppy lay on the passenger seat and looked anxious. His tail had stopped wagging.

âHey, I saved you,â she told him. âLook happy.â

He obviously didnât get the word *saved.* He sort ofâ¦hunched.

What was she going to do with him while she was in court?

She drove her car into her personal parking space. How neat was this? She remembered the day her name had gone up. Her parents had cracked champagne.

It was a fine car park. Butâ¦it was in full sun.

She might not be a dog person but she wasnât dumb. She couldnât leave Kleppy here. Nor could she take him homeâor not yetânot until sheâd done something about dog-proofing. Her parents? Ha! Theyâd take him right back to Fred.

So she drove two blocks to the local park. There were shade trees here and she could tie him by her car. Anyone passing would know he hadnât been abandoned.

She hoped Kleppy would know it, too.

She gave him water and his bone and he slumped on the ground and looked miserable.

Maybe he didnât know it.

She looked at him and sighed. She took off her jacketâher lovely tailored jacket that matched her skirt exactlyâand she laid it beside Kleppy.

He sniffed it. The paw came out againâand he inched forward on his belly until it was under him.

Her very expensive jacket was on dirt and grass, and under dog. Her professional jacket.

She didnât actually like that jacket anyway; she preferred less serious clothes. She was five foot four and a bitâ¦mousy. But maybe lawyers should be mousy. Her shiny brown hair curled happily when she let it hang to her shoulders but Philip liked it in a chignon. She had freckles but Philip liked her to wear foundation that disguised them. She had a neat figure that looked good in a suit. Professional. Lawyers should be professional.

Sheâd given up on *professional* this morning. She was so late.

Oh, but Kleppy looked sad.

âIâll be back at midday,â she told him. âTwo hours, tops. Promise. Then weâll work out where we go from here.â

Where? Sheâd think of something. She must.

Maybe Raffâ¦

There was a thought.

Fred had said Raff had a menagerie. What difference would one dog make? Once upon a time, heâd had seven.

Instead of advice, maybe she could persuade him to take him.

âYouâd like Rafferty Finn,â she told Kleppy. âHeâs basically a good man.â Good but flawedâ*trouble*âbut she didnât need to go into that with Kleppy.

But how to talk him into it? Or Philip into the alternative?

It was too hard to think of that right now. She grabbed her briefcase and headed to the courthouse without looking back. Or without looking back more than half a dozen times.

Kleppy watched her until she was out of sight.

Heart twist. She didnât want to leave him.

It couldnât matter. Her work was in front of her and what was more important than work?

Â

What was facing her was the case of The Crown versus Wallace Baxter.

Wallace was one of three Banksia Bay accountants. The other two made modest incomes. Wallace, however, had the biggest house in Banksia Bay. The Baxter kids went to the best private school in Sydney. Sylvia Baxter drove a Mercedes CoupÃ©, and they skied in Aspen twice a year. They owned a lodge there.

âLucky investments,â Wallace always said but, after years of

juggling, his web of dealings had turned into one appalling tangle. Wallace himself wasnât sufferingâhis house, cars, even the ski lodge in Aspen, were all in his wifeâs nameâbut there were scores of Banksia Bayâs retirees who were suffering a lot.

âItâs just the financial crisis,â Wallace had said as Philip and Abby had gone over his case notes. âI canât be responsible for the failure of overseas banks. Just because Iâm globalâ¦â

Because he was global, his financial dealings were hard to track.

This was a small case by national standards. The Crown Prosecutor who covered Banksia Bay should have retired years ago. The case against Wallace had been left pretty much to Raff, who had few resources and less time. So Raff was rightâ Philip and Abby had every chance of getting their client off.

Philip rose to meet her, looking relieved. The documents they needed were in her briefcase. He kept the bulk of the confidential files, but it was her job to bring day to day stuff to court.

âWhat theâ¦?â

âDid Raff tell you what happened?â

Philip cast Raff a look of irritation across the court. There was no love lost between these two menâthere never had been. âHe said you had to take a dog to the vet, to get it put down. Isnât that his job?â

âHe had cars to move.â

âHe got here before you. What kept you? And whereâs your jacket?â

âIt got dog hair on it.â That, at least, was true. âCan we get on?â

âItâd be appreciated,â the judge said dryly from the bench.

So she sat and watched as Philip decimated the Crownâs case. Maybe his irritation gave him an edge this morning, she thought. He was smooth, intelligent, insightfulâthe best lawyer she knew. Heâd do magnificently in the city. That heâd returned home to Banksia Bayâto herâseemed incredible.

Her parents thought so. They loved him to bits. What was more, Philipâs father had been her brother Benâs godfather. They were almost family already.

âHe almost makes up for our Ben,â her mother said over and

over, and their engagement had been a foregone conclusion that made everyone happy.

Exceptâ¦ Exceptâ¦

Donât go there.

She generally didnât. It was only in the small hours when she woke and thought of Philipâs dry kisses, and thought why donât I feelâ¦why donât I feelâ¦?

Like she did when she looked at Rafferty Finn?

No. This was pre-wedding nerves. She had no business thinking like that. If she so much as looked at Raff in that way itâd break her parentsâ hearts.

So no and no and no.

Raff was on the stand now, steady and sure, giving his evidence with solid backup. His investigation stretched over years, with so many pointersâ¦

But all of those pointers were circumstantial.

She suspected there were things in Philipâs briefcase that might not be circumstantial.

Umâ¦donât go there. There was such a thing as lawyer-client confidentiality. Even if Baxter admitted dishonesty to them outrightâwhich he hadnâtâthey couldnât use it against him.

So Raff didnât have the answers to Philipâs questions. The Crown Prosecutor didnât ask the right questions of Baxter. Itâd take a few days, maybe more, but even by lunch time no one doubted the outcome.

At twelve the court rose. The courtroom emptied.

âYou might like to go home and get another jacket,â Philip said. âIâm taking Wallace to lunch.â

She wasnât up to explaining about Kleppy right now. Where to start? But she surely didnât want to have lunch with Wallace. Acting for the guy made her feel dirty.

âGo ahead,â she said.

Philip left, escorting a smug Wallace. She felt an almost irresistible urge to talk to the Crown Prosecutor, tell him to push harder.

It was only suspicion. She had no proof.

âThanks for taking Kleppy.â Raff was right behind her, and made her jump. Her heart did the same stupid skittering thing it had done for years whenever she heard his voice. She turned to face him and he was smiling at her, looking rueful. âSorry, Abby.

That was a hard thing to ask you to do this morning, but I had no choice.â

Putting Kleppy down. A hard thingâ¦

âIt was too hard,â she whispered. The Crown Prosecutor was leaving for lunch. If she wanted to talk to himâ¦

She was lawyer for the defence. What was she thinking?

âHey, but youâre tough.â Raff motioned to the back of the courtroom, where Bert and Gwen Mackervale were shuffling out to find somewhere to eat their packed sandwiches. âNot like the Mackervales. Theyâre as soft a touch as any Iâve seen. They lost their house, yet youâll get Wallace off.â

âRaff, this is inappropriate. Iâm a defence lawyer. You know itâs what I do.â

âYou donât have to. Youâre better than this, Abby.â

âNo, Iâm not.â

âYeah, wellâ¦â He shrugged. âIâm going to find me a hamburger. See you later.â

Uh-oh. Maybe she shouldnât have snapped. Definitely she shouldnât have snapped. Not when there was such a big favour to ask.

How to ask?

Just ask.

âYou couldnât cope with another dog, could you?â she managed and he stilled.

âAnotherâ¦â

âI couldnât,â she whispered. âI canât. Heâs still alive. Raff, heâ¦he looked at me.â

âHe looked at you.â Raff was looking at her as if sheâd just landed from Mars.

âI couldnât get him put down.â

Raff was carrying papers. He placed them on the nearest bench without breaking his gaze. He stared at her for a full minute.

She didnât stare back. She stared at her shoes instead. They were nice black shoes. Maybe a bit high. Pert, she thought. Pert was good.

There was a smudge on one toe. She considered bending to wipe it and decided against it.

Still silence.

âYouâre keeping Kleppy?â he said at last.

She shook her head. âIâmâ¦I donât think itâs possible. Iâm asking if you could take him. Fred says you have a menagerie. One more wouldnâtâ¦wouldnât be much more trouble. I could pay you for his keep.â

âFred suggestedâ¦â He sounded flabbergasted.

âHe didnât,â she admitted. âI thought of it myself.â

âThat Iâd take Kleppy?â

âYes,â she whispered and she thought that she sounded about eight years old again. She sounded pathetic.

âNo,â he said.

She looked up at him then. Raff Finn was a good six inches taller than she was. More. He was a bit too big. He was a bit too male. He was a bit tooâ¦Raff?

He was also a bit too angry.

âNâ¦No?â

âNo!â His expression was a mixture of incredulity and fury. âI donât believe this. You strung out a dogâs life in the hope Iâd take him?â

âNo, Iâ¦â

âDo you know how miserable he is?â

âThatâs why Iâ¦â

âDecided to give him to me. Thanks, Abby, but no.â

âButâ¦â

âIâm not a soft option.â

âYou have all those animals.â

âBecause Sarah loves them. Do you know how much they cost to feed? I canât go away. I canât do anything because Sarah breaks her heart over each and every one of them. Donât you dare do this to me, Abby. Iâm not your soft option. If you saved Kleppy, then heâs yours.â

âI canâtâ¦â

âAnd neither can I. You brought this on yourself. You deal with it yourself.â His voice was rough as gravel, his anger palpable. âI need to go. I didnât get breakfast and I donât intend to miss lunch. Iâll see you back in court at one.â

He turned away. He strode to the court door and she chewed her lip and thought. But then she decided there wasnât time for thinking. She panicked instead.

âRaff?â

He stopped, not looking back. âWhat?â

Sometimes only an apology would do. She was smart enough to know that this was one of those times. Maybe a little backtracking wouldnât hurt either.

âRaff, Iâm very sorry,â she said. âIt was just a thoughtâor maybe it was just a wild hopeâbut the decision to save Kleppy was mine. Asking you was an easy option and I wonât ask again. But, moving on, if Iâm to keep himâ¦ I know nothing about dogs. Fred didnât suggest you take him, but he did suggest I ask you for help. He said youâll tell me all the things I need to care for him. So pleaseâ¦â

âPlease what?â

âJust tell me what I need to buy at the Stock and Station store. I have a meeting with the wedding caterers after work, so I need to do my shopping now.â

âYouâre seriously thinking youâll keep him?â

âI donât have a choice.â

He was facing her now, his face a mixture of incredulity andâ¦laughter? Where had laughter come from? âYouâre keeping *Kleppy?*â He said it as if sheâd chosen Kleppy above all others.

âThereâs no other dogs out there?â she said, alarmed, and he grinned. His grin lit his faceâlit the whole court. Oh, she knew that grinâ¦

Trouble. Tragedy.

âThereâs thousands of dogs,â he said. âSo many needing homes. But you have to fall for Kleppy.â

âWhatâs wrong with Kleppy?â

âNothing.â He was still grinning. âI take it you havenât told Philip.â

âIâ¦ No.â

âSo whereâs Kleppy now?â His grin faded. âYou havenât left him in the car? The sunâ¦â

âI know that much,â she said, indignant. âI took the car to the park and I tied him to a nice shady tree. He has water and feed. He even has my jacket.â

âHe has your jacket.â He sounded bemused, as if there was some private joke she wasnât privy to.

âYes.â

âAnd youâve tied him upâ¦how?â

âI bought a lead.â

âPlease tell me itâs a chain.â

âThe chains looked cruel. Itâs webbing. Pretty. Red with pictures of balls on it.â

âI donât believe this.â

âWhatâs wrong?â

But she didnât have a chance to answer. Instead, he grabbed her hand, towed her out of the courthouseâpractically at a runâand he headed for the park.

Dragging her behind him.

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Kleppy was gone.

Her pretty red lead was chewed into two piecesâor at least she assumed it was chewed into two pieces. One piece was still tied to the tree.

Her jacket lay on the ground, rumpled. The water bowl was half empty. Apparently chewing leads was thirsty work. The marrowbone wasnât touched.

No dog.

âHe doesnât like being confined, our Kleppy,â Raff said, taking in the scene with professional care.

âYou know this how?â *Heâd chewed through a lead?*

âItâs always been a problem. Iâm guessing heâll make tracks up to the Abrahams place, but who knows where heâll end up in the meantime.â

âHeâll be up at Isaacâs?â

Isaac lived halfway up the mountain at the back of the town. Raff was looking concerned. âIt is a bit far,â he admitted. âAnd from hereâ¦ Itâll be off his chosen beat.â He raked his hair. âOf all the stupidâ¦ I donât have time to go look for a dog.â

âIâll look for him.â

âYou know where to look?â

âDo you?â

âBackyards,â he said. âNever takes the fastest route, our Kleppy.â He raked his hair again. Looking tired. âI need lunch. If Iâm not back in court at one then Baxterâll definitely get off. You need to do this, Abby. I canât.â

Look for a dog all afternoonâ¦ âPhilipâll kill me.â

âThen I guess the weddingâll be off. Is that a good thing?â

Raff spoke absently, as if it didnât bother him if her wedding was at risk. As indeed it didnât. What business was it of his to care about the wedding? What business was it of his to even comment on it? She opened her mouth to say so, but suddenly his gaze focused, sharpened. âIs thatâ¦?â

She turned to see.

It wasâand the change was extraordinary.

When sheâd left him two hours ago, Kleppy had looked defeated and depressed. When heâd crawled onto her jacket he hadnât had the energy to even rise off his stomach.

Now he was prancing across the park towards them, looking practically jaunty. His rough coat was never going to be pretty. One of his ears flopped down, almost covering his eye. His tail was a bit ragged.

But they could see his tail wagging when he was still a hundred yards away. And, as he got closerâ¦

He had something in his mouth. Something pink and lacy.

What theâ¦?

âItâs a bra,â Abby breathed as the little dog reached them. She bent down and the dog circled her twice, then came to her outstretched hand. He rubbed himself against her leg and his whole body shivered. With delight?

He was carrying the bra like a trophy. She touched it and he dropped it into her hand, then stood back as if heâd just presented her with a cheque for a million dollars. His body language was unmistakable.

Look what Iâve found for you! Arenât I the cleverest dog in the world?

She dropped the bra and picked him up, hugging him close. He wriggled frantically and she put him back down. He picked up the bra again, placed it back in her hand and then allowed her to pick him upâas long as she kept the bra.

His meaning couldnât be plainer. âIâve brought you a gift. You appreciate it.â

âYouâve brought me a bra,â she managed and she felt like crying. âOh, Kleppyâ¦â

âIt could just as easily have been menâs jocks,â Raff said. He lifted the end of the bra that was hanging loose. There was a price tag attached. âI thought so. Heâs a bit small to rob clothes

lines, our Kleppy. This has come from Main Street. Morrisy Drapers are having a sale. This will have come from the discount bin at the front of the store.â

Had it? She checked it out. Cop and lawyer for the defence, standing in the sun, examining evidence.

Pink bra. Nylon. White and silver frills. About an E Plus Cup. Room for about three of Abby.

âVeryâ¦very useful,â Abby managed.

âYouâll need to pay for it.â

âSorry?â

âItâs theft,â Raff said, touching the braâs middle with a certain degree of caution. It was looking a bit soggy. âHe never hurts anything. He hunts treasures; he never destroys them. But they do get a bitâ¦wet. Taking it back and apologisingâs not going to cut it.â

âWill they know heâs stolen it?â

âHeâs not a cat burglar,â Raff said gravely, though the sides of his mouth were twitching. âDog burglars donât have the same finesse. Heâs a snatch and grab man, our Kleppy. Thereâll be a dozen people on Main Street whoâll be able to identify him in a line up.â

âOh, myâ¦â And then she paused. Kleppy.

Kleppy was a strange name but sheâd hardly had time to think about it. Nowâ¦ âKleppy. Ohâ¦â

Raff looked like a man starting to enjoy himself. âGot it,â he said, grinning. âAnd thereâs another reason youâre not offloading this mutt onto me. This is a dog who lives to present his master with surprises. No dead rats or old bones for his guy. It has to be interesting. Expensive is good. One of a setâs his favourite. Isaac gave up on him long sinceâhe just paid for the damage and got on with it. So now hereâs Kleppy, deciding youâre his new owner. Welcome to dog ownership, Abigail Callahan. Youâre the proud owner of Banksia Bayâs biggest kleptomaniacâand also the littlest.â

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A kleptomaniacâ¦ Kleppy.

She stared at Raff as if he was out of his mind. He gazed back, lips twitching, that dangerous smile lurking deep within.

She was about to present her fiancÃ© with a kleptomaniac dog?

âI donât believe it,â she managed at last. âThereâs no such thing.â

âYou want to know how I know this dog?â He wasnât even trying to disguise his grin. âIâd like to say Iâm personally acquainted with every dog in Banksia Bay but, even with Sarahâs help, I canât manage that. Nope, Iâm acquainted with Kleppy because Iâve arrested him.â

âArrestedâ¦â

âIâve caught him red-handedâor red-pawedâon any number of occasions. The problem is that he doesnât know how to hide it. Like now. He steals and then he shows off.â

âI donât believe it.â

âYouâve already said that.â

âButâ¦â

âThatâs why no one wants him,â he said, humour fading. âHeâs always been a problem. Henriettaâs had to be honest with everyone who came to the Shelter looking for the ideal pet. He isnât ideal. Isaac paid out on Kleppyâs behalf more times than I can say. Heâs hidden stuff and heâs been accused of stealing himself. Isaac never cared what people thought of him, which was just as well, as thereâs been more womenâs underwear end up at his house than you can imagine. He burned most of itâwhat choice did he have? Can you imagine wandering the town saying who owns this G-string? But he loved Kleppy, you see.â The smile returned. âLike you will.â

âIâ¦ This is appalling.â

âI told you to get him put down.â

âYou know Iâm a soft option.â Anger hit then, fury, pure and simple. âYou know me, Raff Finn. You put this dog in my car because you knew I wouldnât be able to have him put down. You know Iâm a soft touch.â

âNow how would I know that?â he said softly. âI havenât known you for a very long time, Abby. Youâve grown up. Youâve got yourself engaged to Philip. The Abby I knew could no sooner have married Philip than fly. Youâre a lawyer engaged in getting Wallace Baxter off. A lawyer doing cases like thatâof course you can get a dog put down.â

His gaze met hers, direct, challenging, knowing he was calling a bluff she couldnât possibly meet.

âYou still can,â he told her. âPut Kleppy in the car and take him back to Fred. Youâve made his last hours happy by giving him the freedom for one last hoist. Heâll die a happy dog.â

You still can. Say something.

She couldnât think of a thing to say.

She was hugging Kleppy, who had a pink bra somehow looped around his ears.

She still hugged Kleppy.

What Raff was saying was sensible. Very sensible. There were too many dogs in the world. Sheâd done her best by this one. Sheâd let him have a happy morningâif indeed Raff was right and Kleppy did enjoy stealing.

But he was certainly a happier dog now than heâd been when sheâd first met him. He was warm and nuzzly. He was poking his damp nose against her neck, giving her a tentative lick.

His backside was wriggling.

Take him back to Fred? No way.

Sheâd always wanted a dog.

Philip would hate a dog.

Her marriage suddenly loomed before her. Loomed? Wrong word, but she couldnât think of another one.

Philip was wonderful. He was her rock. Heâd looked after her and her family for ever. When Ben had died heâd held her up when her world seemed to be disintegrating.

Philip was right for her. Her parents loved him. Everyone thought Philip was wonderful. If she hadnât married himâ¦ She *hadnât* married him, she reminded herself. Not yet. That was the point.

In nine days sheâd be married. Sheâd move into the fabulous house Philip had bought for them, and sheâd be Philipâs wife.

Philipâs wife would never bring home a kleptomaniac dog. Sheâd never bring home any sort of dog. So, if she wanted oneâ¦

She took a deep breath and she knew exactly what sheâd do. Her last standâ¦ Like it or leave it, she thought, and she sounded desperate, even to herself. But she had made up her mind.

âIâm keeping him.â

âGood for you,â Raff said and the twinkle was back with a vengeance. âCan I be there when you tell Philip?â

âGet lost.â

âThatâs not kind. Not when you need help to buy what Kleppy needs.â

âIâm starting to get a very good idea of what Kleppy needs,â she said darkly. âAn eight-foot fence and a six-foot chain.â

âHeâll mope.â

âThen heâll have to learn not to mope. Itâs that or dead.â

âYouâll explain that to him how?â

âYouâre not being helpful.â

âNo,â he said and glanced at his watch. âIâm not. I need a hamburger and timeâs running out before court resumes. You want a list?â

âNo. I meanâ¦â The afternoon suddenly stretched before her, long and lonely. Or not long and lonely for her. Long and lonely for the little dog squirming in her arms. Her thief. âI do need a list. I also need a chain.â She hesitated. âBut I canât leave him here. This morning was only two hours. This afternoonâs four at least before I can collect him.â

âSo take him home.â

âI canât.â It was practically a wail. She caught herself. Fought for a little dignity. âI meanâ¦itâs not dog-proof. I need an hour or so there to get things organised.â

âThatâs fair enough.â He paused, surveyed her face and then decided to be helpful. âYou want me to ask Sarah to help?â

Sarah. Her eyes widened. Of course. Sarah loved dogs. Andâ¦ Maybe her first suggestion was still possible. Maybeâ¦

âNo,â Raff said before she opened her mouth. âSarahâs not taking ownership of another dog and if you ask her Iâll personally run you out of town. I mean that, Abby.â

âI wouldnât ask her.â

âNo?â

She managed a twisted smile, abandoning her last forlorn hope.

âNo.â

âGood, then,â he said briskly, moving on. âBut sheâll enjoy taking care of him this afternoon. Kleppyâll be tired after his excursion. We have a safe yard. The other dogs are quietâthey

wonât overwhelm himâand you can come by this evening and pick him up.â

Go back to Raffâs? She couldnât imagine doing that. But Raff was moving on.

âItâs a good offer,â Raff said. âTake it or leave it, but do it now. If you accept, then Iâll lock this convicted thief in my patrol car and take him out to Sarah. I may even do it with lights and sirens if it means getting back to court on time. You can take my list and go buy what you need and get back to court on time as well. Or I leave you to it. Whatâs it to be, Abby?â

âIâ¦â She was starting to panic. Go out to Raffâs tonight? To Raffâs? She hadnât been there sinceâ¦

âUnless you have another friend you can call on?â he suggested, and maybe her emotions were on her face. Definitely her emotions were on her face.

âAll my friends work,â she wailed.

âThen itâs Sarah. Tonight, and you *will* collect him.â That irrepressible grin emerged again. âHey, you have a dog. What a wedding gift. To you and to Philip, one kleptomaniac dog. Happy wedding.â

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He drove out to Sarah with Kleppy beside him and he found the smile inside him growing. Somewhere inside, the Abby heâd once known and loved was still there.

Once upon a time sheâd loved him.

That had been years ago. A teenage romance. Yes, theyâd felt as if they were truly, madly, deeply, but they were only kids.

At nineteen heâd headed off to Sydney to Police Training College. Abby had been stuck in Banksia Bay until she finished school, and sheâd needed a partner for her debutante ball.

He still remembered the arguments. âYouâre my boyfriend. How can I have anyone else as my partner? Why canât you come home more often so we can practice?â

And moreâ¦ âYou and Ben are totally obsessed with that car. Every time you come home, thatâs all you ever think about.â

They were kids. He hadnât seen her need, and she hadnât seen his. Philip had been home from university; heâd agreed to partner her for her ball and Raff was given the cold shoulder.

Theyâd been kids moving on. Changing.

They had changed, he conceded, only just now heâd seen a glimpse that the old Abby was still in there. Feisty and funny and gorgeous.

But stillâ¦unforgiving, and who could blame her?

Heâd forgiven himself. He didnât need Abigail Callahanâs forgiveness. He couldnât need it.

If only she wasnât adorable.

CHAPTER THREE

THE afternoon was interminable. The case was boringâfinancial evidence that was as dry as dust.

The courtroom was as dry as dust.

She couldnât think of a way to tell Philip.

All afternoon she was aware of Raff on the opposite side of the courtroom. He was here this afternoon to present the police case. Thankfully, he wouldnât be here for the rest of the week. He was called away twice, for which she was also thankful, but he wasnât called away for long enough.

He was watching her.

He was waiting for her to tell Philip?

He was laughing at her. She knew he was. The man spelled trouble and heâd just got her into more.

Trouble? One small dog, easily contained in a secure backyard. How hard could this be?

So tell Philip.

There was lots of time. The police case went on for most of the afternoonâtedious financial details. She and Philip both knew it back to front. There were gaps while documents were given to the jury. She had time to tell him.

Philip would be civilised about it. Heâd never raise his voice to her, especially not in a courtroom. But stillâ¦

She couldnât.

Across the court, Raff still watched her.

Finally the court rose. Raff crossed the courtroom and Abby panicked. *Donât say anything.*

âYou guys okay?â he asked, and anyone who didnât know him would think it was simply a courtesy question. They wouldnât see that lurking laughter. *Trouble.*

âWhy wouldnât we be?â Philip demanded, irritated. He disliked Raffâof course he did. He showed no outright aggressionâsimply cool, professional interaction and nothing

more.

âItâs getting close to your wedding,â Raff said. âNo last minute nerves? No last minute hitches?â

âWe need to go,â Abby said, feeling close to hysterics. âI have a meeting with the caterers in half an hour.â

âI bet thereâs lots of stuff you need to do.â Raffâs voice was sympathy itself. âMessy things, weddings.â

âNot ours,â Philip snapped. âEverythingâs under control. Isnât that right, sweetheart?â

âIâ¦yes.â Just go away, Raff. Get out of our lives. âAre you coming to the caterers with me, Philip?â

âI canât.â Philip turned a shoulder on Raff, excluding him completely. âMy dad and my uncles are taking me out to dinner and bowling. A boys only night. I thought I told you.â He had.

âThat sounds exciting,â Raff said, mildly interested. âBowling, huh. I guess I wonât be untying you naked from in front of the Country Womenâs Association clubrooms at dawn, then.â

âMy friendsâ¦â

âDonât do wild buckâs nights,â Raff said approvingly. âI guessed that. Youâll probably be home in bed by eight. So youâre alone tonight, Abby? Organising caterers on your lonesome. And anything else you need to do.â

âCould you pleaseâ¦â she started and then stopped, the impossibility of asking another favourâasking him to bring Kleppy homeâoverwhelming her.

âNope,â Raff said. âNot if youâre about to ask me anything that involves the wedding. Me and weddings keep far away from each other.â

âWeâre not asking you to be involved,â Philip snapped. âAbby can cope with the caterers herself. Ready to go, sweetheart?â

âYes,â she managed and allowed Philip to usher her out of the court.

She should have told Philip then. She had ten minutes while Philip went over the results of the day, what they needed to do to strengthen their case the next morning, a few wedding details heâd forgotten to cover.

Philip was a man at ease with himself. It was only when Raff

was around that he got prickly and maybeâ¦well, that did have to do with their past. Raff had messed with Philipâs life as well as hers.

Philip was a good man. He was looking forward to his wedding. His father and his uncles were taking him out for a pre-wedding night with the boys and heâd enjoy it.

She didnât want to mess with that until she must, even if it did mean delaying telling him about Kleppy; even if it meant going to Raffâs alone. Maybe itâd be better going alone. Going with Philipâ¦ It could make things worse.

âCome round tonight after bowling,â she told him, kissing him lightly on the lips. Her fiancÃ©. Her husband in nine days. She loved him.

And if he was a bit dullâ¦ Heâd had his days of being wild, they all had, before life had taught them that caution was good.

âWe should get a good nightâs sleep,â he said.

âYes, but there are things we need to discuss.â Heâd like Kleppy when he saw him, she decided. Kleppy of the limpid eyes, wide and brown and innocent.

She should change his name. To Rover? Rover was a Philipish name for a dog.

But Kleppy suited him.

âWhat do we need to discuss?â he was asking.

Say it.

No. Introduce him to Kleppy as a done deal.

âJustâ¦caterers and things. I donât want to make too many decisions on my own.â

He smiled and kissed her and she had to stop herself from thinking dry and dusty. âYou need to have more self-confidence. Make your own decisions. Youâre a big girl now.â

âIâ¦yes.â

âAnything you decide is fine by me.â

âBut you will drop by?â

âIâll drop by. Night, sweetheart.â And off he went for his night with the boys. His dad and his uncles. Bowling. Yeeha!

And that was the type of thinking that was getting her into trouble, she decided. So cut it out.

Philip was a lovely man. He was handsome. He was beautifully groomed. Theyâd had a very nice holiday last

yearâtheyâd gone to Italy and Philip had had four suits made there. They were lovely suits. Heâd also had two briefcases madeâmatching ones, magnificent leather, discreetly initialled and fitted out to Philipâs specifications. Sheâd only been mildly irritated when heâd decreedâfor the sake of the briefcasesâher surname would be his.

What was the issue, after all? She was to be his wife.

But buying suits and briefcases had taken almost half of their holiday.

Cut it out!

It was justâ¦ Raff had unsettled her. This whole day had unsettled her.

âSo go home and organise your house for one small dog, then go organise caterers,â she told herself. âOh, and pay for Kleppyâs stolen goods. Just do what has to be done, one step at a time.â

And then go out to Raffâs?

Aargh.

She could do this.

She could visit Rafferty Finn.

She could do it. One step at a time.

Â

The rest of the afternoon was full, but Abby and her dog were front and centre of his thoughts. He shouldnât have offered to bring Kleppy home. Not this afternoon. Not ever.

He didnât want her coming here.

After dinner, Raff washed and Sarah wiped, while Sarah told him about her day, the highlight of which had been minding Kleppy.

âHeâs a sweetheart,â his sister told him, her face softening at the thought of the little dog. âHeâs so cuddly. Why does he love his bra?â

âHeâs a thief. He likes stealing things. Heâs a bad dog.â He found himself smiling at the thought of strait-laced Abigail Callahan having to front up and pay for stolen goods.

Maybe it wasnât a good idea to keep thinking of Abby. Not like this.

She was Philipâs fiancÃ©e. Anything between them was a distant memory. It had to be.

But Sarah was looking doubtful. She looked down at Kleppy, snoozing by the fire, his bra tucked underneath him. âHe doesnât look bad. Heâs really cute and Abbyâs very busy. Are you sure Abby wants him?â

Raff hardened his heart. âIâm sure.â

âAnd Abbyâs coming tonight?â

âYes.â

âAbbyâs my friend.â

She was. The tension of the day lessened a little at that. No matter what lay between Raff and Abby, no matter how much she hated seeing him, Abby had always been Sarahâs friend.

Theyâd all been best friends at the time of the accident. Ben and Raff. Abby and Sarah. Two big brothers, two little sisters. Philip had been in there, too. A gang of five.

But one car crash and friendship had been blown to bits.

In the months that followed, no matter that Abby had loathed Raff so much that seeing him made her cry, sheâd stuck by Sarah. Sheâd visited her in Sydney, despite her parentsâ disapproval, taking the train week after week to Sydney Central Hospital and then later to the rehabilitation unit on North Shore.

Back home, Sarahâs friends had fallen away. Acquired brain injury was a hard thing for friends to handle. Sarah was still Sarah, and yet not. Sheâd struggled with everythingârelearning speaking, walking, the simplest of survival skills.

Theyâd come so far. She could now almost live independentlyâalmost, but not quite. She had her animals and their little farm Raff kept for her. She worked in the local sheltered workshop three days a week, and twice a week Abby met her after work for drinks.

Drinks being milkshakes. Two friends, catching up on their news.

Raff would pick Sarah up and sheâd be happy, bubbly about going out with her friendâbut Abby would always have slipped away from the cafÃ© just before Raff was due. Since the accident, Abby had never come back to their farm. Sheâd never talked to Raff unless she absolutely must, but sheâd never taken that anger out on Sarah.

âIâm glad Abbyâs coming tonight,â Sarah said simply. âAnd Iâm glad sheâs getting a dog. Abbyâs lonely.â

Lonely? Sarah rarely had insights. This one was startling.

âNo, sheâs not. Sheâs getting married to Philip.â

âI donât like Philip,â Sarah said.

That was unusual, too. Sarah liked everyone. When Philip met herâas of course he did because this wasnât a big townâhe was unfailingly friendly. But stillâ¦ In the times when Raff had been with her and theyâd met Philip, Sarahâs hand had crept to his and sheâd clung.

Was that from memories of the accident?

The accident. Donât go there.

âThereâs nothing wrong with Philip,â he told Sarah.

âI want Abby to come,â Sarah said, wiping her last pot with a fierceness unusual for her. âBut I donât want Philip. He makes me scared.â Scared?

âThe manâs boring,â Raff said. âThereâs nothing to be scared about.â

âI just donât like him,â Sarah said and, logical or not, Raff felt exactly the same.

Â

She didnât want to go.

She must.

She gazed round her little house with a carefully appraising eye. Sheâd hung her wedding dress in the spare room and sheâd packed away everything else she thought a dog might hurt.

Sheâd bought a dog kennel for outside and a basket for inside.

Sheâd bought a chain for emergencies but she didnât intend using it. Her back garden was enclosed with a four-foot brick fence, and sheâd checked and rechecked for gaps.

She had dog food, dog shampoo, flea powder, worm pills, a dog brush, padding for his kennel and a book on training your dog. Sheâd had a quick browse through the book. There was nothing about kleptomania, but confinement would fix that.

Sheâd take him for a long walk every day. Kleppy might sometimes be lonely, she conceded, but surely loneliness was better than the fate that had been waiting for him.

And if he was lonelyâ¦ She might sneak him into the office occasionally.

That, though, was for the future. For now, she was ready to

fetch him. From Raff.

So fetch him. Thereâs not a lot of use staring at preparations, she told herself. Itâs time to go claim your dog.

It was eight oâclock. Philipâs night out would be over by ten and she had to be back here by then.

Of course sheâd be back. Ten minutes drive out. Two minutes to collect Kleppy and say hi to Sarah. Ten minutes back. Just go.

She hadnât been out there sinceâ¦

Just go.

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âWhen will she be here?â

âAny time soon.â

He shouldnât care. He shouldnât even be here. There was bound to be something cop-like that needed his attention at the stationâonly that might look like he was running, and Rafferty Finn wasnât a man who ran.

âShe never comes here.â

âShe likes going to cafÃ©s with you too much.â

Sarah giggled, hugging Kleppy close. This place was pretty relaxed for a dog. The screen door stayed permanently open and the dogs wandered in and out at will. The gate to the back garden was closed, but Kleppy seemed content to be hugged by Sarah, to watch television and to occasionally eat popcorn.

Raff watched television, too. Or sort of. It was hard to watch when every sense was tuned to a car arriving.

Â

The Finn place hadnât changed.

The moon was full but she hardly needed to see. Sheâd come here so often, to the base of Black Mountain, that she knew every bend. As kids, she and Ben had ridden their bikes here almost every day.

This had been their magic place.

Her parents had disapproved. âThe Finns,â her mother had told them over and over, âare not our sort of people.â By that she meant they didnât fit into her social mould.

Abby and Ben didnât care.

Old Mrs Finnâeverybody called her Granâhad been the

familyâs stability. Granâs husband had died long before Abby had known her, and it was rumoured that his death had been a relief, for the town as well as for Gran. After his death, Gran had quietly got on with life. She ran a few sheep, a few pigs, a lot of poultry. Her garden was amazing. She seemed to spend her life in the kitchen and her baking was wonderful.

Abby barely remembered Raff and Sarahâs mother, but there had been disapproving whispers about her as well. Sheâd run away from home at fifteen, then come home unwed with two small children.

Sheâd worked in the local supermarket for a time. Abby had vague memories of a silent woman with haunted eyes, with none of the life and laughter of her mother or her children.

Sheâd died when Abby was about seven. Abby remembered little fuss, just a family whoâd got on with it. Gran had taken over her grandchildrenâs care. Life had gone on and the Finns were still disapproved of.

Abby and Ben had loved it here. They had always been welcome.

And now? She turned into the drive but her foot eased from the accelerator.

âYouâre always welcome.â She could remember Gran saying it to her, over and over. She remembered Gran saying it to her after Benâs death. As if she could come back hereâ¦

She had come back. Tonight.

This is only about a dog, she told herself, breathing deeply. *Nothing else. The past is gone. Thereâs no use regrettingâno use even thinking about it. Go get your dog from Raff Finn and then get off his land.*

Raff never meantâ¦

I know he didnât, she told herself. Of course he didnât. Accidents happened and it was only stupidity.

Could she forgive stupidity?

Ben was dead. Why would she want to?

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He saw her stop at the gate. It was after eightâwould Philip have finished his wild night out? Would she have him with her?

Maybe that was why theyâd stopped. Philip would be doing his utmost to stop her keeping Kleppy.

Would she defy him? Sheâd need strength if she was going to stay married to Philip. Sheâd need strength not to be Philipâs doormat.

But the thought of Abby as a doormat made him smile. Sheâd never been a doormat. Abby Callahan was smart, sexy, sassyâand so much more. Orâ¦she had been.

Sheâd followed him round like a shadow for years. He and Ben had scoffed at Abby and Sarah, the little sisters. Theyâd teased them, and had given them such a hard time. Theyâd loved them both. Untilâ¦

Until one stupid night. One stupid moment.

He closed his eyes as heâd done so many times. Searching for a memory.

Summer. Nineteen years old. Home from Police Training College. Ben home from university. Theyâd spent weekend after weekend tinkering with a car they were trying to restore. Finally theyâd got it started, towards dusk on the day they were both due to go back to the city. They were pumped with excitement. Aching to see it go.

They couldnât take it on the roadâit wasnât registeredâbut up on Black Mountain, just behind Isaac Abrahams place, there was a cleared firebreak, smoothed for access for fire trucks.

If they could get it out there, they could put it through its paces.

He remembered loading the car on the trailer behind Granâs ancient truck, Benâs dad watching them in disapproval. âYou should be home tonight, Ben. Your motherâs expecting you.â

âWe need to see this working,â Ben had told him and Mr Callahan had left in a huff.

Sarah was watching them, wistful. âCan I come?â

âThereâs not enough room in the truck.â

âWhat if Philip brings me?â

âSure. Bring Abby.â

âYou know Abbyâs mad at youâand sheâs not talking to Philip, either.â

But neither Ben nor Raff were interested. They were only interested in getting their car going.

And it worked. Up on the mountain, he remembered Ben driving, yahooing, both of them high as kites. Months of work

paying off.

He remembered getting out. Swapping drivers. Thinking it was too dark to be on this track, and it was starting to rain. Plus Ben had to get back to have dinner with his parents.

But Ben saying, âWe have lights. If I can cope with Mum being fed up, you can cope with a bit of rain. Just do one turn to see for yourself how well she handles.â

Thenâ¦nothing. Heâd woken in hospital. Concussion. Multiple lacerations. Broken wrist and broken ankle.

All he knew of the accident was what was written in the official reports.

Philip had driven Sarah onto the track to find them. Heâd turned off the main road onto the firebreak, and ventured just far enough down the break to reach the crestâ¦

Philip had been the only one uninjured. His recall was perfect, stark and bleak.

Raff had burst over the crest on the wrong side of the road, driving so fast he was almost airborne. Philip had nowhere to go. Both drivers swerved, but not fast enough.

Both cars had ended up in the trees. The rain and the mess from the emergency vehicles had washed the tracks away before the authorities could corroborate Philipâs story. Raff couldnât be prosecutedâbut he had punishment enough. Heâd killed his best mate and heâd destroyed his sister. He missed Ben like heâd miss a twinâan aching, gut-destroying loss. Heâd lost a part of Sarah that could never be restored.

His grandmother had died six months later.

And Abby?

Facing Abby had been the hardest thing heâd had to do in his life. The first time heâd seen herâ¦sheâd looked at him and it was as if he was some sort of black hole where her heart used to be.

âIâm sorry,â heâd said and sheâd simply turned away. Sheâd stayed away for ten years.

Her brother was dead and sometimes Raff wished it could have been him.

Which was dumb. Whoâd take care of Sarah, then?

Let it go.

Go greet Abby. And Philip?

Abby and Philip. Banksia Bayâs perfect couple.

CHAPTER FOUR

RAFF was waiting on the veranda and Abby felt her breath catch in her throat. She came close to heading straight back down the mountain.

What was it with this man? She was well over her childhood crush. Sheâd decided today that it was the uniform making him sexy, but he wasnât wearing a uniform now.

He was in faded jeans and an old T-shirt, stretched a bit tight.

He looked good enough toâ¦

To get away from fast.

He was leaning idly against the veranda post, big, loose-limbed, absurdly good-looking. He was standing with crossed arms, watching her walk towards him. Simply watching.

His eyes said caution.

She didnât need the message. Caution? She had it in spades.

âWhereâs Kleppy?â she asked, and she knew she sounded snappy but there wasnât a thing she could do about it.

âPhilâs still on his wild night out?â

âCut it out, Raff.â

âSorry,â he said. Then he hesitated and his eyes narrowed. âNope. Come to think of it, Iâm not sorry. Why are you marrying that stuffed shirt?â

âDonât be insulting.â

âHeâs wealthy,â Raff conceded. âParents own half Banksia Bay. Heâs making a nice little income himself. Or a big income. Heâs already bought the dream home. Heâs starting to look almost as wealthy as Baxter. You guys will be set for life.â

âStop it,â she snapped. âJust because heâs a responsible citizenâ¦â

âIâm responsible now. Maybe even more responsible than you. What have you got on Baxter that I donât know about?â

âYou think Philip and I would ever do anything illegal?â

âMaybe not you. Philip, thoughâ¦â

âI donât believe this. Of all theâ¦ I could sue. Give me my

dog.â

âSarah has your dog,â he said and stood aside, giving her no choice but to enter a house sheâd vowed never to set foot in again.

He was standing on the top step of the veranda. He didnât move.

She would not let him make her feel like this. Like sheâd felt as a kid.

But her arm brushed his as she passed him, so slightly that with anyone else she wouldnât have noticed.

She noticed. Her arm jerked as if sheâd been burned. She glowered and stomped past and still he didnât move.

She pushed the screen door wide and let it bang behind her. She always had. It banged like it always banged and she got the same effectâ¦ From the depths of the house came the sound of hysterical barking. She braced.

When sheâd been a kid and sheâd come here, the Finnsâ dog pack would knock her over. Sheâd loved it. Sheâd be lying in the hall being licked all over, squirming and wriggling, a tadpole in a dog pond, giggling and giggling until Raff hauled the dogs off.

When she didnât end up knocked over sheâd felt almost disappointed.

She was bigger now, she conceded. Not so likely to be knocked over by a pack of dogs.

But there werenât as many dogs, anyway. There was an ancient black Labrador, almost grey with age. There was a pug, and there was Kleppy bringing up the rear. Wagging his tail. Greeting her?

She knelt and hugged Kleppy. He licked her face. So did the old Labrador. The pug was young but this oneâ¦she even remembered the feel of his tongue. âBoris!â

âAbby!â Sarah burst out of the kitchen, her beam wide enough to split her face. She dived down onto the floor and hugged her friend with total lack of self-consciousness. âAbby, youâre here. Iâve made you honey jumbles.â

âIâ¦great.â Maybe she should get up. Lawyer on floor hugging dogâ¦

Boris was licking her chin.

âBoris?â she said tentatively and she included him in the hug she was giving Kleppy.

âHe is Boris,â Raff said and she twisted and found Raff was watching them all from the doorway. âHow old was he when you were last here, Abby?â

âIâ¦ Three?â

âHeâs fourteen now. Old for a Labrador. Youâve missed out on his whole life.â

âThatâs not all Iâve missed out on,â she whispered. âHow could I ever come back?â She shook her head and hauled herself to her feet. Raff made an instinctive move to help, but then pulled away. Shook his head. Closed down.

âBut you will stay for a bit,â Sarah said, grabbing Abbyâs hand to pull herself up. Movement was still awkward for Sarah; it always would be. âIâve told the dogs they can have a honey jumble each,â she told Abby. âBut they need to wait until theyâve cooled down. You canât take Kleppy home before heâs had his.â

âI could take it with me.â

âAbby,â Sarah said in a term of such reproach that Abby knew she was stuck.

How long did honey jumbles take to cool?

Apparently a while because, âIâve just put them in the oven,â Sarah said happily. âI made a lot after tea but Raff forgot to tell me to take them out. They went black. Even the dogs didnât want them. Raff never forgets,â she said, heading back to the kitchen. âBut heâs funny tonight. Do you think itâs because youâre here?â

âI expect thatâs it,â Abby said, trying desperately to find something to say. Babbling because of it? âMaybe itâs because Iâm a lawyer. Sometimes police donât like lawyers âcos they ask too many questions.â

âAnd sometimes they donât ask enough,â Raff growled.

âMeaningâ¦â

âBaxterâ¦â

Oh, for heavenâs sakeâ¦ âLeave it, Raff,â she said. âJust butt out of my life.â

âI did that years ago.â

âWell, donât stop now.â She took a deep breath. âSarah, love, Iâm in a rush.â

âI know you are,â Sarah said and pushed her into a kitchen chair. âYou sit down. Raff will make you a nice cup of tea and

weâll talk until the honey jumbles are ready. But donât yell at Raff,â she said disapprovingly. âRaffâs nice.â

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Raff was nice? Okay, maybe a part of him was nice. She might want to hate Raff Finnâand a part of her couldnât help but hate himâbut she had to concede he was caring for Sarah beautifully.

The twelve months after the crash had been appalling. Even her grief for Ben hadnât stopped Abby seeing the tragedy that was Sarah.

Sheâd lain unconscious for three weeks and everyone had mourned her as dead. At one time rumour had it that Raff and Gran were asked to stop life support.

At three weeks sheâd woken, but it was a different Sarah.

Sheâd had to relearn everything. Her memory of childhood was patchy. Her recent memory was lost completely.

Sheâd learned to walk again, to talk. She coped now but her speech was slow, as was her movement. Gran and Raff had brought her home and worked with her, loved her, massaged, exercised, pleaded, cajoled, bulliedâ¦

When Gran died Raff had taken it on himself to keep on going. For over a year he hadnât been able to work. Theyâd lived on the smell of an oily rag, because, âSheâs not going into care.â

With anyone else the community would have rallied, but not with the Finns. Not when Raff was seen as being the cause of so much tragedy.

How heâd managedâ¦

If the accident happened now the community would help, she thought. Somehow, in the last years, Raff had redeemed himself. He was a fine cop. Heâd cared for Sarah with such love and compassion that the worst of the nay-sayers had been silenced. Sheâd even thoughtâ¦it was time she moved on. Time she learned to forgive.

But over and overâ¦ Heâd killed Ben.

How could she ever be friends with him again?

She didnât need to be. She simply chose to be distant. So she sat in Raffâs kitchen while Sarah chatted happily, showing her the guinea pigs, explaining theyâd had too many babies and that Raff had told her they had to sell some but how could she

choose?

Smelling honey jumbles in a kitchen she loved.

Knowing Raff was watching her.

She found her fingers were clenched on her knees. They were hidden by the table. She could clench them as much as she wanted.

It didnât help. This place was almost claustrophobic, the memories it evoked.

But Raff was watching her and how Raff was making her feel wasnât a memory. This was no childhood crush. It was like a wave of testosterone blasting across the table, assaulting her from every angle.

Sarah was laughing.

Raff wasnât laughing. He was simply watchful.

Judgemental? Because she was marrying Philip?

Why shouldnât she marry Philip? He was kind, thoughtful, clever.

Her fallback?

Umâ¦no. He was her careful choice.

Sheâd gone out with Philip before Ben had died, just for a bit, when the boys had left home, Raff to the Police Training College, Ben to university.

Philip had left for university, too, but heâd caught glandular fever and come home for a term.

Sheâd needed a date for her debutante ball and was fed up with Raff being away, with the boys being obsessed with their junk-pile car when they did come home.

Philip had the most wonderful set of wheels. He had money even then. But he wasnât Raff.

Sheâd made her debut and sheâd found an excuse to break up. The decision wasnât met with regret. Philip had immediately asked Sarah out.

Maybe if the accident hadnât happenedâ¦ Maybe Sarah and Philipâ¦

Where was she going? Donât even think it, she decided. They were different people now.

Philip especially was different. After the crashâ¦he was so caring. Whenever she needed him, he was there. Heâd encouraged her to take up law as well. âYou can do it,â heâd

said. âYouâre bright, organised, meticulous. Do law and weâll set up the best law firm Banksia Bayâs ever seen. We can care for our parents that way, Abby. Your parents miss Ben so much. We can be there for them.â

And so they were. It was all working out. All she needed to do was avoid the judgement on Raffâs face. And avoid the way Raff made herâ¦feel.

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How could he bear her here?

One night, one car crash.

And it stood between him and this woman for ever.

How could she marry Philip?

But he knew. It was even reasonable, he conceded.

Philip was okay. Once heâd even been a friend. Yes, the man made money and Raff did wonder how, but that was just his nasty cop mind. Yes, he took on cases Raff wouldnât touch with a bargepole. If he got Baxter offâ¦

He would get him off, but Raff also knew a portion of Philipâs fee would end up as a cheque to the pensioners Baxter had ripped off. Not all of itâPhilip was careful, not stupid with his charityâbut the town might end up being grateful. Baxter would think he was great as well.

It was only Raff whoâd feel ill, and maybe that was part of ancient history as well. If Philip hadnât been there that nightâ¦

How unfair was that?

âTell us about your wedding dress,â he said, and Abby shot him a look that was both suspicious and angry.

âYou want to knowâwhy?â

âSarah would like to know.â

âIâm going to the wedding,â Sarah said and pointed to the invitation stuck to the fridge. âYou should come, too. Did you get an invitation? Where did you put it? Raffâs coming, too, isnât he, Abby?â

âIâm on duty that day,â Raff told her before Abby was forced to answer. âWe talked about it, remember? Mrs Hendersonâs taking you.â

âItâd be more fun if you were there.â

No, it wouldnât, Raff thought, but he didnât say so. He glanced at his watch. âI reckon theyâll be cooked, Sares.â

âOoh,â Sarah said, happily distracted. âMy honey jumbles. I could make you some more for your wedding present, Abby. Does Philip like honey jumbles?â

âSure he does,â Abby said. âWho wouldnât?â

Honey jumbles. A big cosy kitchen like this. Dogs.

Would Philip like honey jumbles?

Maybe not.

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Abby ate four honey jumbles and Sarah beamed the whole time, and how could a girl worry about how tight her wedding dress was going to be in the face of that beam?

Sarah wasnât the only one happy. This morning Kleppy had been due for the needle. Tonight he was lying under her chair licking the last of Sarahâs honey jumbles from his chops.

And Sarahâs beam, and Kleppyâs satisfaction, and Raffâs thoughtful, watchful gaze made her feelâ¦made her feelâ¦

Like she needed to leave before things got out of hand.

She needed to go home to Philip. To tell him she had a dog.

âWhatâs wrong?â Raff asked and he sounded as if he cared. That scared her all by itself. She pushed her chair back so fast she scared Kleppy, which meant she had her dog in her arms and she was at the door before she meant to be.

She hadnât meant to look like she was rushing.

She was rushing.

âWill you take some jumbles in a bag?â Sarah asked and she managed to calm down a little and smile and agree. So Sarah bagged her some jumbles, but she was holding Kleppy, she didnât have a hand free, which meant Raff carried her jumbles down to the car while she carried her dog.

Kleppy was warm and fuzzy. His heart was beating against hers. He was a comfort, she thought, and even as she thought it he stretched up and licked her, throat to chin.

She giggled and Raff, whoâd gone before and was stowing her jumbles onto the back seat, turned and smiled in the moonlight.

âDogs are great.â

âThey are,â she said and felt happy.

âPhilip will be okay with him?â

Why must he always butt into what wasnât his business? Why must he always spoil the moment?

âHe will.â

âSo youâll tell him tonight.â

âOf course.â

âI wish you luck.â

âI wonât need it.â

âNo?â

âButt out, Finn.â

âYouâre always saying that,â he said. âBut itâs not in my power to butt out. Itâs my job to intervene in domestic crises. Stopping them before they start is a life skill.â

âYou seriously think Philip and I would fight over a dog?â

âIâm thinking you might fight for a dog,â he said softly. âThe old Abbyâs still there somewhere. Sheâll fight for this dog to the death.â

âAnd how melodramatic is that?â

âMelodramatic,â he agreed. âCall the police emergency number if you need me.â

âWhy would I possibly need you?â

âJust offering.â He was holding the passenger door wide so she could pop Kleppy in.

âYou know Philip wouldnâtâ¦â

âYeah, I know Philip wouldnât.â He took Kleppy from her and laid him on the passenger seat. âYouâre giving him honey jumbles and Kleppy. Why wouldnât the man be delighted?â

âI donât know when I hate it mostâwhen youâre being offensive or youâre being sarcastic.â

âMaybe theyâre the same thing.â

âMaybe they are. I wish you wouldnât.â

âNo, you donât,â he said softly. âIt helps you keep as far away from me as you want. Isnât that right, Abby?â

âRaffâ¦â

âItâs okay, I understand,â he said. âHow could I fail to understand? What youâre doing is entirely reasonable. I only wish your second choice wasnât Philip.â

âHeâs not my second choice. Heâs my first.â

âThatâs right,â he said, sounding suddenly thoughtful. âI forgot. You went out with Philip when you were seventeen. For two whole months and then you dumped him. Donât those reasons hold true now?â

âI canât believe youâre asking meâ¦â

âIâm a cop. I ask the hard questions.â

âI donât have to answer.â

âMeaning you canât.â

âMeaning I donât need to. Why are you asking this now?â

âIâve hardly had a chance until now. You back off every time you see me.â

âAnd you know why.â

âI do,â he said harshly and she winced and thought she shouldnât have said it. It was too long ago. The whole thingâ¦ It was a nightmare to be put behind them.

âYes, Philip and I broke up when I was seventeen,â she managed. âBut people change.â

âI guess we do.â He paused and then said, almost conversationally, âYou know, once upon a time we had fun. We even decided we loved each other.â

They had. Girlfriend and boyfriend. Inseparable. Raff had shared her first kiss. It had feltâ¦ It had feltâ¦

No. âWe were kids,â she managed. âWe were dumb in all sorts of ways.â

He was too close, she decided. It was too dark. She should be back in her nice safe house waiting for Philip to come home. She shouldnât be remembering being kissed by her first boyfriend.

âI loved kissing you,â he said and it wasnât just her remembering.

âIt didnât meanâ¦â

âMaybe it did. Thereâs this thing,â he said.

âWhat thing?â But she shouldnât have asked because, the moment she had, she knew what he was talking about. Or maybe sheâd known all along.

This thing? This frisson, an electric current, an indefinable thing that was tugging her closerâ¦

No. She had to go home. âRaffâ¦â

âYou really want to be Mrs Philip Dexter? What a waste.â

âLeave it!â

âChoose someone else, Abby. Marrying him? Youâre burying yourself.â

âI am not.â

âDoes he make you sizzle?â

âI donâtâ¦â

âDoes he? You know, I canât imagine it. Good old Philip, knocking your socks off. Are you racing home now to have hot sex?â

âI donât believe Iâm hearing this.â

âYou see, itâs such a waste,â he said, and suddenly he was even closer, big and bad and dangerous.

Big, bad and dangerous? Certainly dangerous. His hand came up and cupped her chin, forcing her to look up at him, and her sense of danger deepened. But she couldnât pull away.

âI wouldnât mind if it wasnât Philip,â he told her and she wondered if he knew the effect he was having on her. She wondered if he could sense how her body was reacting. âIâve known since Ben died that nothing could bring back what was between you and me. But there are men out there who could bring you alive again. Men whoâd like Kleppy.â

âPhilip will like Kleppy.â

âLiar.â

He was gazing down into her eyes, holding her to truth.

She should break away. She *could* break away, she thought wildly. He was only holding her chinânothing more. She could step back, get into the car and drive home. To Philip.

She could. But he was gazing down into her eyes and he was still asking questions.

âSo tell me he makes you sizzle.â

âIâ¦â

âHe doesnât, does he?â Raff said in grim satisfaction. âBut there are guys out there who couldâwho could find out what youâre capable ofâwhatâs beneath your prissy lawyer uniform. Because youâre still there, somewhere. The Abby Iâ¦â

He paused. There was a momentâs loaded silence when the whole world stilled. *The Abby Iâ¦*

She should push away. She shouldâ¦

She couldnât.

She tilted her face, just a little.

The moment stretched on. The darkness stretched on.

And then he kissed her. As inevitably as time itself, he kissed her.

She couldnât move. She didnât move. She froze. And thenâ¦

Heat. Fire. The contact, lips against lips, was a tiny point but

that point sizzled, caught, burned and her whole body started heating. Her face was tilted to his but he had no need to hold her. It was as if she was melting against himâinto him. Raffâ¦

He broke away, just a little, and his eyes blazed in the moonlight. âAbby,â he said and it was a rough, angry whisper. âAbby.â

âIâ¦â

âDoes he do this?â he demanded. He snagged her arms and held them behind her but this was no forceful hold. It was as if her arms might get in the way, could interfere, and nothing must. Nothing could.

She was paralysed, she was burning, but she couldnât escape. She didnât want to escape. What was between themâ¦ It sizzled. Tugged as if searching for oxygen.

He was watching her in the moonlight, his eyes questioning. She wouldnât answer. She couldnât.

She was being held by Raff. A man sheâd once loved.

She found herself lifting herself, tiptoe.

So her mouth could meet his again.

This morning sheâd fantasised about Raff Finn. Sex on legs. But thisâ¦

If sheâd expected anything it was a kiss of anger, a kiss of sexual tension, passion, nothing more. And maybe it had started like that. But it was changing.

His kiss was tender, aching, even loving. It was as unexpected as ice within a fire, heating, cooling, sizzling all at once. Sheâd never felt anything like thisâsheâd never known sensations like this could exist.

Raff.

Heâd released her hands and they were free to do as she willed. Her will was that her hands were behind *his* back, drawing him closer, for how could she not want him close? Sense had flown. Thoughts had flown. There was only this man. There was only this need.

There was only now.

Raff.

Did she say his name?

Maybe she did, or maybe it was just a sigh, deep in her throat, a sound of pure sensual pleasure. Of taking something sheâd never dreamed she could have. Of sinking into the

forbidden, of the longed for, of a memory sheâd have to put away quite soon but not yet, please, not yet.

Oh, but his mouthâ¦ Clever and warm and beguiling, it was coaxing her to places she had no business going, but she wanted, oh, she wanted to be there. She was helpless, melting into him, degree by achingly wonderful degree.

He was irresistible.

She wasâ¦appalled.

Somehow, she had to break this. Her head was screaming at her, neon danger signs flashing through her sensual need. No!

âNo!â It came out a muffled whisper. If he didnât hearâ¦if he ignored it, how could she say it again?

Did she want him to hear it?

But he did, he had, and the wrench as he put her away from him was indescribable. He let her go. He stepped back from her and his eyes in the moonlight were almost as dazed as hers.

But then his face hardened, tightened, and she knew he was moving on.

As she must.

Her motherâs voiceâ¦ *Keep away from the Finn boy. Heâs trouble.*

He surely was. She was kissing him nine days before her wedding. She was risking allâfor the Finn boy?

âIâ¦â

âJust go, Abby,â he said and she didnât recognise his voice. It was harsh and raw and she could even imagine there was pain. âGet out of here. You know you donât want this.â

âOf course I donât.â

âThen take your dog and go. Iâll see you in court.â

Of course she would. Sheâd see him and heâd be back to being the local cop and sheâd be a lawyer sitting beside her fiancÃ©, trying to pretend tonight had never happened.

But it had happened. The feel of his mouth on hers was with her still.

She caught herself, gasped and thumped down into the driverâs seat before she could change her mind.

âThat was ridiculous,â she managed. âHowâ¦how dare youâ¦? â

âYou wanted it as much as I did.â

âThen weâre both stupid.â

âWe are,â he said gravely. âWe were. But heaven help us, Abby, if weâre stupid still.â

CHAPTER FIVE

ABBY drove home in a daze. She felt ill. The feel of Raffâs mouth on hers wouldnât goâit felt as if her lips were surely bruised and yet she knew they couldnât be.

There had been tenderness in his kiss. It hadnât been one-sided. He hadnât been brutal.

It had been a kiss ofâ¦

No. Donât even think about it.

Kleppy put out his paw in a gesture she was starting to know. Giving comfort as well as taking it. The feel of him beside her was absurdly comforting.

Almost as if he was a little part of Raffâ¦

And there was a dopey thing to think. The whole night had been dopey, she thought. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Imagine if she ever thought there could be anything between herself and Raff. Imagine the heartbreak.

Her heart clenched down. No! Just because the man was a load of semi-controlled testosteroneâ¦ Just because he had the ability to push her buttonsâ¦

She turned into her street and Philipâs car was out the front. Her heart sank.

Philip, she told herself. Not a load of semi-controlled testosterone. A good, kind man whoâd keep her happyâwhoâd keep her safe.

I might get tired of safe, she whispered to herself and then she let herself open her mind to the rush of memory that was Ben and she felt the concept of safe, the need for safe, close around her again. Safe was the only way.

âHi,â she said, climbing from the car. âThe buckâs night finished early, then?â

âHardly a buckâs night.â He took her hands and kissed her and she had to stop herself from thinking *dry as dust.* âJust my dad and uncles and cousins.â

âWhy arenât you having a buckâs night?â

âTonight was enough,â Philip said contentedly. âIâm busy right up to the honeymoon. Where have youâ¦â

But then he paused. Inside the car, Kleppy had stirred and yawned and whimpered a little.

âWhatâs that?â

Deep breath. âItâs Kleppy.â

âKleppy?â

âHeâs my dog,â she said and she had a really good shot at not sounding defensive. Maybe she even succeeded. âYou know Raff gave me a dog this morning and asked me to take him to be put down? I couldnât. Heâs Isaac Abrahamsâ dog, he needs a new home and Iâve decided to keep him. Sarahâs been looking after him for me.â

There was no need to mention Raff again. âSo we have a dog,â she said and she surprised herself by sounding cheerful. âPhilip, meet Kleppy. Kleppy, meet Philip. I just know you two are going to be best of friends.â

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He didnât like it, but she wouldnât budge; she didnât budge and finally he conceded.

âItâll have to sleep outside.â

â*He,* not *it.*â

âHeâll have to sleep outside,â he concededâno mean concession.

âOkay,â she said with her fingers crossed behind her back. He could sleep outside for a little, she thought, until Philip got used to the idea and then she could sort of sneak him in. And for the next nine nights he could sleep inside at her place.

âAnd what about our honeymoon?â

âIâll get Mrs Sanderson to feed and walk him.â

âSheâll charge.â

âWe can afford it.â

âI donât want Eileen Sanderson snooping in our backyard.â

âIâll figure something else out, then. But youâll love him.â

âIf you want a dog, then why donât we get a pure-bred?â he asked, checking Kleppy out with suspicion.

âI like Kleppy.â

âAnd Finn dumped him on you.â

âIt was my decision to keep him.â

âYouâre too soft-hearted.â

âI canât do a thing about that,â she admitted, knowing the hurdle had been leaped and she was over the other side. âYou want to come in for coffee and get acquainted with our new pet? â

âI have work to do. Iâm not confident about tomorrow.â

He would be confident, Abby knew, but heâd still go over his notes until he knew them backwards. And once again she wonderedâwhy had he come back to Banksia Bay? He was smart, he was ambitious, he could have made serious money in the city.

âI came back for you,â heâd told her, over and over, but she knew it was more than that. He spent time with her parents. He worked at the yacht club where Ben had once sailed. Every time a challenge occurred that might draw him to the city, he looked at it with regret but he still turned back to Banksia Bay.

She kissed him goodnight and carried Kleppy inside, thinking every time she laid down an ultimatum Philip caved in.

This dog or no wedding?

This dog.

âHe loves me,â she told Kleppy, sitting down on the hearth rug and allowing her scruffy dog to settle contentedly on her knee. âHeâll take you because he loves me.â

But sheâd seen Philipâs ruthless behaviour in court. He could be ruthless. Heâd never liked dogs.

Why didnât he just say no?

âIâm so lucky he didnât,â she whispered and she hugged Kleppy a bit tighter and then gazed towards the spare room door. Her wedding dress lay behind.

She was lucky?

Of course she was.

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She was gone and Raff stayed outside, staring sightlessly into the moonlit night.

Abby Callahan.

Right now there was nothing in the world he wanted but Abby Callahan.

Oh, but there was. Inside, Sarah would be snuggling into bed, surrounded by dogs and cats, dreaming of the day sheâd just

hadâher animals, her honey jumbles. Her big brother.

He loved Sarah.

He also loved this place. He loved this town. But love or not, heâd leave if he could. To stay in this place with so many memoriesâ¦

To stay in this place and watch Abby marriedâ¦

But leaving wasnât an option. Heâd stay and he wouldnât touch her again. Tonight had been an aberration, as stupid as it was potentially harmful. He didnât want to upset Abby. It wasnât her fault she was the way she was.

It was his.

He was thirty years old and he felt a hundred.

He hardly needed to see her again before the wedding. His participation in the Baxter trial was almost over. Heâd given the prosecutor all the help he could manage, even if it wasnât enough to convict the guy. There might be another couple of times he was called to the stand, but otherwise he could steer well clear.

Soâ¦ Heâd drop Sarah off at the church next Saturday, pick her up afterwards and itâd be done.

Abby Callahan would be married to Philip Dexter.

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Abby spent until midnight making Kleppy hers. She bathed him and blowed him dry with her hairdryer. He was never going to be a beautiful dog, but he was incredibly cuteâin a shambolic kind of way. He was a very individual dog, she decided.

He tolerated the hairdryer.

He ate a decent dinner, despite his pre-dinner snack of honey jumbles.

He investigated her bedroom as she got ready for bed. And, curiously, he fell in love with her jewellery box.

It was a beautiful cedar box with inlaid Huon pine. Philipâs grandfather had made it for her when she and Philip had announced their engagement. She loved its craftsmanship and she also loved the woodâs faint and beautiful perfume, stronger whenever she opened it.

She also loved Philipâs grandpa, she thought, as she removed Kleppyâs paw from where it had been resting proprietorially on the box. His woodwork was his passion. Heâd made these

beautiful boxes for half the town. âItâll last for hundreds of years after Iâm gone, girl,â heâd told her and she suspected it would.

Philipâs grandpa was part of this town. Philipâs family. Her future.

More peopleâs happiness than hers was tied up in next weekâs wedding. That should make her feel happy, but right now it was making her feel claustrophobic. Which was dumb.

âDo you like the box or the jewels?â she asked Kleppy, deliberately shifting her thoughts. She opened the lid so he could see he couldnât make millions with a jewel heist.

Kleppy nosed the trinkets with disinterest, but looked longingly at the box. He sniffed it again and she thought it was its faint scent he liked.

âNo!â she said and put it further back on the chest.

Kleppy sighed and went back to his bra. The bra sheâd paid for and given to him. Yes, he shouldnât benefit from crime but today was an exception.

He made a great little thief.

He slept on her bed, snuggled against her, and she loved it. He snored. She loved his snore. She didnât even mind that he slept with his bra tucked firmly under his left front paw.

âWhatever makes you happy, Klep,â she told him, âbut thatâs the last of your loot. You belong to a law-abiding citizen now.â

One who needs to stay right away from the law.

From Raff.

Donât think of Raff. Think of the wedding.

Some hope. She slept, thinking of Raff.

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She woke feeling light and happy. For the past few weeks sheâd woken with the mammoth feeling that her wedding was bursting in on her from all sides. Her mother was determined to make it perfect.

It was starting to overwhelm her.

But not this morning. She loved that Kleppy woke at dawn and stuck his nose in her face and she woke to dog breath and a tail wagging.

It was lucky Philip wasnât here. Heâd have forty fits.

He wouldnât mind being here. Or ratherâ¦heâd be happy if

she was *there*. As far as Philip was concerned, she was wasting money having her own little house when he already had a wonderful house overlooking the sea.

Her parents had said that, too. When sheâd moved back to Banksia Bay after university theyâd welcomed her home and even had her bedroom repainted. Pink.

She had a choice. Philipâs house or her old bedroom.

But her grandparents had left her a lovely legacy and this little house was her statement of independence. As she let Kleppy outside to inspect her tiny garden she thought how much she was going to miss it.

Philipâs house was fabulous. Sheâd been blown away that he could afford to build it, and it had everything a woman could possibly want.

So get over it.

She left Kleppy to his own devices and went and checked on her wedding dressâjust to reassure herself she really was getting married.

She should be excited.

She was excited. It was a gorgeous dress. It was exquisite.

It had taken her two years to make.

The pleasure was in making it. Not in wearing it.

This was dumb. She felt a cold spot on her leg and there was Kleppy, wagging his tail, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Looking hopefully at the front door.

Looking for adventure?

âIâll take you round the block before I go to work,â she told him. âAnd Iâll come home at lunch time. Iâm sorry, Klep, but you might be bored this morning. I canât help it, though. Itâs the price youâve paid for me bailing you out of death row.

âAnd Iâm going to be in court this morning, too,â she told him as he looked doleful. âYouâre a lawyerâs dog and Iâm a lawyer. Iâm a lawyer with a gorgeous, hand-beaded wedding dress and youâre a lawyerâs dog with a new home. We need to be grateful for what we have. Iâm sure we are.â

She was grateful. It was just, as she left for work and Kleppy looked disconsolately after her, she knew how Kleppy felt.

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Raff wasnât in court.

Of course he wasnât. He didnât need to be. He was a cop, not a prosecutor, and he had work to do elsewhere. Heâd given his evidence yesterday. Philip wouldnât call him back but sheâd sort of hoped the Crown Prosecutor would.

There were things the Crown Prosecutor could askâ¦

It wasnât for her to know that or even think thatâ*she was lawyer for the defence*âand it also wasnât for her to have her heart twist because Raff wasnât here.

She slid into the chair beside Philip and he smiled and kissed her and then said, âSecond thoughts about the dog? He really is unsuitable.â

This was what would happen, she thought. Heâd agree and then slowly work on her to come round to his way of thinking.

He wasnât all noble.

âNo, and I wonât be having any,â she said.

âWhere is he now?â

âSafely in my garden.â Four-foot fence. Safe as houses.

âHeâll make a mess.â

âI walked him before I left. Walkingâs good. Iâm going to do it every morning from now on. Maybe you can join us.â

âGymâs far better aerobic exercise,â he said. âYou need a fully planned programme to get full cardiac advantage. Walkingâsâ¦â

She was no longer listening.

Her morning had begun.

It was very, very boring.

The hands on the clock moved at a snailâs pace.

How bored would Kleppy be?

How bored was she?

Malcolm, the Crown Prosecutor, should do something about his voice, she thought. It was a voice designed to put a girl to sleep.

Ooh, Wallace looked smug.

Ooh, she was boredâ¦

Lunch time. All rise. Hooray.

And then the door of the court swung open.

All eyes turned. As they would. Every person in the room, with the possible exception of Wallace and Philip, was probably

as bored as she was.

And suddenly she wasnât bored at all. For standing in the doorway wasâ¦Raff.

Full cop uniform. Grim expression. Gun at his side, cop ready for action. At his sideâonly lowerâwas a white fluff ball attached to a pink diamantÃ© lead. And in his arms he was carrying Kleppy.

âIâm sorry, Your Honour,â he said, addressing the judge. âBut Iâm engaged in a criminal investigation. Is Abigail Callahan in court?â

Of course she was. Abby rose, her colour starting to rise as well. âKâ¦Kleppy,â she stammered.

âCould you come with me, please, Miss Callahan?â Raff said.

âSheâs not going anywhere,â Philip snapped, rising and putting his hand on Abbyâs shoulder. âWhat theâ¦â

âIf she wonât come willingly, Iâm afraid I need to arrest her,â Raff said. âAccessory after the fact.â He looked down at his feet, to where the white fluff ball pranced on the end of her pink diamantÃ© lead. A lead that led up to Kleppyâs jaw. Kleppy had a very tight hold. âAbigail Callahan, your dog has stolen Mrs Fryerâs peke. You need to come now and sort this out or Iâll have to arrest you for theft.â

The courtroom was quiet. So quiet you could have heard a pin drop.

Justice Weatherbyâs face was impassive. Almost impassive.

There was a tiny tic at the side of his mouth.

Raffâs face was impassive, too. He stood with Kleppy in his arms, waiting for Abby to respond.

Kleppy looked disgusting. He was coated in thick black dust. His tail was wagging, nineteen to the dozen.

In his mouth he held the end of the pink lead and his jaw was clamped as if he wasnât going to let go any time soon.

On the other end of the lead, the white fluff ball was wagging her tail as well.

âHe was locked in my backyard,â Abby said, eyeing the two with dismay.

âMy sharp investigative skills inform me that the dog can dig,â Raff said, shaking Kleppy a little so a rain of dirt fell onto the polished wood of the courtroom door. âWill you come with

me, please, maâam?â

âJust give the dog back to whoever owns it,â Philip snapped, his hand gripping Abbyâs shoulder tightly now. âTie the other one up outside. Abigailâs busy.â

âRaff, pleaseâ¦â Abby said.

âMrs Fryerâs hopping mad,â Raff said, unbending a little. âIâve waited until court broke for lunch but Iâm waiting no longer. You want to avoid charges, you come and placate her.â

She glanced at Philip. Uh-oh. She glanced at Justice Weatherby. The tic at the corner of his mouth had turned into a grin. Someone was giggling at the back of the court.

Philipâs face looked like thunder.

âSort the dog, Abigail,â he snapped, gathering his notes. âJust get it out of here and stop it interfering with our lives.â

âRight this way, maâam,â Raff said amiably. âThe solicitor for the defence will be right back, just as soon as she sorts her stolen property.â

Â

Abby walked out behind Raff, trying to look professional, but she didnât feel professional and when she reached the outside steps and the autumn sun hit her face she felt suddenly a wee bit hysterical. And alsoâ¦a wee bit free?

As if Raff had sprung her from jail.

Which was a dumb thing to think. Raff had attempted to make her a laughing stock.

âI suppose you think youâre funny,â she said and Raff turned and looked at her, and once again she was hit by that wave of pure testosterone. He was in his cop uniform and my, it was sexy. The sun was glinting on his tanned face and his coppery hair. He was wearing short sleeves and his armsâ¦ They were twice as thick as Philipâs, she thought, and then she thought that was a very inappropriate thing to think. As was the fact that his eyes held the most fabulous twinkle.

Her knees felt wobbly.

What was she doing? She was standing in the sun and lusting after Raff Finn. The man whoâd destroyed her lifeâ¦

She needed to get a grip, and fast.

âYouâre saying Kleppy dug all the way out of my garden?â

she snapped, trying to sound disbelieving. She *was* disbelieving.

âYouâre implying I might have helped?â Raff said, still with that twinkle. âYou think I might have hiked round there and loaned him a spade?â

âNo, Iâ¦â Of course not. âBut the fence sits hard on the ground. Heâd have had to go deep.â

âHeâs a very determined dog. I did warn you, Abigail.â

âWhy donât you just call me maâam and be done with it,â she snapped. âWhat am I supposed to do now?â

âApologise.â

âTo you?â

He grinned at that and his whole face lit up. Sheâd hardly seen that grin. Not sinceâ¦ Not sinceâ¦

No. Avoid that grin at all costs.

âI canât imagine you apologising to me,â he said. âBut you might try Mrs Fryer. I imagine sheâs apoplectic by now. She rang an hour ago to say her dog had been stolen from outside the draperâs. I did think we were looking at dog-nappingâsheâd definitely pay a ransomâbut we have witnesses saying the napper was seen making a getaway. It seems Kleppy decided to go find another bra and found something better.â

She closed her eyes. This was not good, on so many levels.

âYou caught him?â

âI didnât have to catch him,â he said, and his smile deepened, a slow, smouldering smile that had the power to heat as much as the sun. âI found the two of them on your front step.â

âOn myâ¦â

âHe seems to think of your place as home already. Home of Abby. Home of Kleppy. Or maybe he was just bringing this magnificent gift to you.â Oh, Kleppy.

She stared at her scruffy, kleptomaniac, mud-covered dog in Raffâs arms. He stared back, gazing straight at her, quivering with hope. With happiness. A dog fulfilled.

Why did her eyes suddenly fill?

âWhyâ¦why didnât you just take Fluffy back to Mrs Fryer?â she managed, trying not to sniff. *She had a dog.*

âWatch this.â He set Kleppy down and tugged the diamantÃ© lead, trying to dislodge it from Kleppyâs teeth.

Kleppy held on as if his life depended on it.

Raff tugged again.

Kleppy growled and gripped and glanced across at Abbyâand his appeal was unmistakable. *Come and help. This guyâs trying to steal your property.* Her property.

Raff released him. The little dog turned towards her, his whole body quivering in delight. She stooped and held out her hand and he dropped the lead into it.

Oh, myâ¦

She was having trouble making herself speak. She was having trouble making herself think. This disreputable mutt had laid claim to her.

She should be horrified.

She loved it.

âYou could have just taken Fluffy off the other end of the lead,â she managed.

âHey, your dog growled at me,â Raff said. âYou heard him. He could have taken my hand off.â

âHe was wagging his tail at the same time.â

âIâm not one to take chances,â Raff said. âI might be armed but Iâm not a fast draw. Too big a risk.â

She looked up at him, big and brawny and absurdly incongruous. Cop with gun. Heâd shoot to kill?

âYou donât have capsicum spray?â she managed.

âLady, you think this vicious mutt could be subdued by capsicum spray?â

She ran her fingers down the vicious muttâs spine. He arched and preened and waggled his tail in pleasure.

The fluff ball moved in for a back scratch as well.

She giggled.

âAbigailâ¦â It was Philip, striding down the steps, looking furious.

Philip. Dignity. She scrambled to her feet and the dogs looked devastated at losing her.

âIâm just settling the dogs down,â she managed. âBefore Raff takes them away.â

âBefore *we* take them away,â Raff said. He motioned to his patrol car.

âYou can cope with this yourself, Finn,â Philip snapped.

âNo,â Raff said, humour fading. He lifted Kleppy in one arm and Fluff Ball in the other. âYou cope with getting Wallace off,â

he told Philip. âAbigail copes with the dogs.â

âI needâ¦â

âYouâre getting as little help as I can manage to get that low life off the hook,â Raff snapped. âAbigail, come with me.â

Â

She went. Raff was not giving her a choice, and she knew Mrs Fryer would be furious.

Behind her, Philip was furious but right now that seemed the lesser of two evils.

She sat in the front of Raffâs patrol car with two dogs on her knee and she tried to stare straight ahead; to think serious thoughts. She still wanted to giggle.

âKleppy should be in the back,â Raff said gravely. âA known criminal.â

âYouâve accused me of being an accessory. Why donât you toss me in the back as well?â

âI like you up front,â he said. âYou do my image good.â

âI need dark glasses,â she said, glowering. âCarted round town in a police car.â

âYou will keep a kleptomaniac dog. It might well push you over to the dark side. Spoil that good-girl reputation. Send you into the shadowy side, like me.â

Her bubble of laughter faded at that. Heâd spoken lightly, but there was truth behind his words.

The shadowy sideâ¦

Raffâs grandfather and then his mother had given the family a bad name. A drunk and then a woman whoâd broken societyâs rulesâ¦ If Raffâs mother had had the strength to defend herself, to ride out community criticism, then maybe it would have been different but sheâd been an easy target. The family had been an easy target.

Raff, thoughâ¦ He had defended himself. Heâd come back here after the accident, heâd made a home for Sarah, heâd looked on community disdain with indifference.

Did it hurt?

It wasnât anything to do with her, she thought, but, as they pulled up outside Louise Fryerâs, she watched the middle-aged matron greet Raff with only the barest degree of civility. It must

still hurt.

After the accidentâ¦ Thereâd been no trial.

She remembered the investigators talking to her parents. Thereâd been insufficient evidence to charge him.

âIs Raff denying it?â That had been Abby, whispering from the background. She barely remembered those appalling days after the crash but she did remember that. She did remember asking. âWhat does Raff say?â

âHe canât remember a thing,â the investigator told her. âHis blood alcoholâs come back zero and frankly thatâs a surprise. He was just a stupid kid doing stupid things.â

âOur Ben wasnât stupid,â her mother said hotly.

âLed astray, more like,â the investigator said and the fair part of Abby, the reasonable part, thought no, Ben hadnât been wearing his seat belt. It wasnât all Raffâs fault.

Heâd been stupid. He had been on the wrong side of the dirt road and heâd been speeding.

Heâd killed Ben and injured his sister.

Maybe that was enough punishment for anyone. The authorities seemed to think so. Even though her parents wanted him thrown in jail, it had simply been left as an accident.

Raff had come back as the town cop, heâd cared for his sister and heâd worked hard to rid himself of that bad boy reputation. For the most part he now had community respect, but there were thoseâher parentsâ friendsâ¦people with long memoriesâ¦ He was still condemned.

Louise Fryer, coming out now with her mouth pursed into a look of dislike, was one of the more vocal of the condemners.

âHavenât you found her yet?â Her voice was an accusation. âIâve had five phone calls. People have seen her. Donât you know how valuable she is?â

Abby was trying to untangle leads to get out of the car.

âYou donât care,â Mrs Fryer said. âWe need a decent police presence in thisâ¦ Ohâ¦â

For, finally, Abby was out. She set Fluff Ball on the ground. Fluff Ball headed over to Mrs Fryer.

Butâ¦ Uh-oh. Kleppy was out of the car and after his prize. He grabbed the lead and Fluff Ball stopped in her tracks.

Fluff Ball looked at Mrs Fryer, then looked at Kleppy. She wagged her pompom and proceeded to check out Kleppyâs rear.

âSheâll catch somethingâ¦ Get it awayâ¦â Louise was practically screeching.

Abby sighed. She picked up both dogs and tucked them firmly under her arms. âThank you, Kleppy, but no,â she said severely. She took the lead from Kleppy and handed over Fluff Ball.

And finally Mrs Fryer realised who she was. âAbigail!â

âHi, Mrs Fryer.â

âWhat are you doing here?â

âMy dog stole your dog.â

âYour dog?â Louiseâs eyes were almost popping out of her head. âThatâs never your dog.â

âHe is. His nameâs Kleppy. Heâs lovely but Iâve only had him for a day so heâs not exactly well trained. But he will be.â Just as soon as she installed fences down to bedrock.

âHas this man foisted him onto you?â Her glare at Raff was poisonous.

âNo.â Not exactly. Or actuallyâ¦yes. But that was what the woman was expecting her to say, she thought. Raff Finnâtownâs bad boy. One of *those Finns*.

Capable of anything.

Which was what she thought, too, she reminded herself, so why was she standing here figuring out how to defend him?

âHe didnât foistâ¦â she started.

âYes, I did,â Raff said before she could get any further. âHave you forgotten already? I definitely foisted. And thatâs exactly what youâd expect of someone like me, isnât it, Mrs Fryer? And here I am, messing up your front garden. But itâs okay. Your dogâs been restored. Justice has been done so I can step out of your life again. If youâll excuse meâ¦ Abby, when Mrs Fryerâs given you a nice cup of tea so you can both recover from your Very Nasty Experience, could you walk back to court yourself, do you think?â

Iâ¦â She stared at him, speechless. He gave her his very blandest smile.

âI bet Louise wants to hear all about the wedding preparations. Sheâll be invited, though, wonât she?â

âYes,â Louise said, a bit confused but mostly belligerent. Her dislike for Raff was unmistakable. âOf course I am. Iâm a friend

of dear Philipâs mother.â

âThere you are; youâre practically family.â Raffâs gaze met hers and there was laughter behind his eyesâpure trouble. âAll it takes for you to be friends for life is for your two dogs to bond, which theyâre doing already. Me, I have other stuff to do. Murderers and rapists to chase.â

âOr the police station lawn to mow,â Abby snapped and then wished she hadnât.

âI was just saying that to Philipâs mother the other night,â Louise said. âOld Sergeant Troy used to keep the Station really nice.â

âYeah, but he wasnât a Finn,â Raff said. âThe place has gone to hell in a handbasket since I arrived. Did you think of the lawn yourself, Abigail, or did Philip mention it? A tidy man, our Philip. But enough. Murderers, rapistsâand lawn!â He sighed. âA policemanâs lot is indeed a tough one. See you ladies later. Have a nice cup of tea.â

He turned and walked away. Louise put her hand on Abbyâs arm, holding her back.

The toad. Raff Finn knew she wouldnât be able to get away from here for an hour.

âMake sure you plant some petunias when youâre finished,â Abby called after him. âItâd be a pity if we saw our police force bored.â

âPetunias it is,â he said and gave her an airy wave. âConsider them planted. In between thefts. How long till the next snatch and grab?â He shook his head. âKeep off the streets, Abigail, and keep a tight hold on that felon of yours. Next time, I might have to put you up for a community corrections order. The pair of you might find yourself planting my petunias for me.â

CHAPTER SIX

ABBY didnât go back to court. Philip phoned to find out where she was and she decided she had a headache. She did have a headache. Her headache was wagging his tail and watching as she dog-proofed her fence.

According to the Internet, to stop foxes digging into a poultry pen you had to run wire netting underground from the fence, but flattening outward and forward, surfacing about eighteen inches from the fence. The fox would then find itself digging into a U-shaped wire cavity.

That meant a lot of digging. Would it work when Kleppy The Fox was sitting there watching?

âDonât even think about it,â she told him. âPhilipâs being very good. We canât expect his patience to last for ever.â

Philip.

She was expecting him to explode. He didnât.

He arrived to see how she was just after sheâd finished cleaning up after fence digging. They were supposed to be going out to dinner. Two of Philipâs most affluent clients had invited them out to Banksia Bayâs most prestigious restaurant as a pre-wedding celebration.

When Abby thought of it her headache was suddenly realâand, surprisingly, she didnât need to explain it to Philip.

âYou look dreadful,â he said, hugging her with real sympathy. âWhite as a sheet. You should be in bed.â

âIâ¦yes.â Bed sounded a good idea.

âWhereâs the mutt?â

âOutside.â Actually, on her bed, hoping sheâd join him.

âYou canât keep him,â Philip said seriously. âHeâs trouble.â

âThis morning wasnât his fault.â

âYou donât need to tell me that,â Philip said darkly. âThe dog might be trouble but Finnâs worse. Itâs my belief he set the whole thing up. Look, Abby, the best thing would just be for you

to take the dog back to the Animal Shelter.â

âNo.â

He sighed but he held his temper.

âWeâll talk about it when youâre feeling better. Iâm sorry you canât make tonight.â

âWill you cancel?â

âNo,â he said, surprised. âTheyâll understand.â

Of course they would. Theyâd hardly notice her absence, she thought bitterly. Theyâd talk about their property portfolios all night. Make some more money.

âWhat will you eat?â he asked, solicitous, and she thought she wouldnât have to eat five courses and five different wines. Headaches had their uses.

âIâll make eggs on toast if I get hungry.â

âWell, keep up your strength. You have a big week ahead of you.â

He kissed her and he was off, happily going to a wedding celebration without her.

The moment the door shut behind him, her headache disappeared. Just like that.

Why was she marrying him?

Uh-oh.

The question had been hovering for months. Niggling. Shoved away with disbelief that she could think it. But, the closer the wedding grew, the bigger the question grew. Now it was the elephant in the room. Or the Tyrannosaurus Rex. What was the worldâs biggest dinosaur?

Whatever. The question was getting very large indeed. And very insistent.

Philip was heading to a dinner sheâd been dreading. He was anticipating it with pleasure.

Worse. Philipâs kiss meant absolutely nothing. Last nightâ¦ Raffâs kiss had shown her how little Philipâs kisses did mean.

And worse still? Sheâd almost been wanting him to yell at her about Kleppy.

How had she got into this mess?

It had justâ¦happened. The car crash. Philip, always here, supporting her parents, supporting her. Interested in everything she was doing. Throwing himself, heart and soul, into this town.

Throwing himself, heart and soul, into her life.

She couldnât even remember when sheâd first realised he intended to marry her. It was just sort of assumed.

She did remember the night heâd formally asked. Heâd proposed at the Banksia Bay Private Golf Club, overlooking the bay. The setting had been perfect. A full moon. Moonbeams glinting on the sea. The terrace, a balmy night, stars. A dessert to die forâchocolate ganache in the shape of a heart, surrounded by strawberries and tiny meringues. A beautifully drawn line of strawberry coulis, spelling out the words âMarry Meâ.

But thereâd been more. Philip had left nothing to chance. The small town orchestra had appeared from nowhere, playing Pachelbelâs *Canon.* The staff, not just from the restaurant but from the golf club as well, crowding into the doorways, applauding before she even got to answer.

âIâve already asked your parents,â Philip said as he lifted the lid of the crimson velvet box. âThey couldnât be more pleased. Weâre going to be so happy.â

He lifted the ring she now woreâa diamond so big it made her gaspâand slid it onto her finger before she realised what was happening. Then, just in case she thought he hadnât got it completely right, heâd tugged her to her feet, then dropped to his knees.

âAbigail Callahan, would you do me the honour of becoming my wife?â

She remembered thinkingâhysterically, and only for the briefest of momentsâwhat happens if I say no?

But how could she say no?

How could she say no now?

Why would she want to?

Because Rafferty Finn had kissed her?

Because Raff made her feelâ¦

As heâd always made her feel. As if she was on the edge of a precipice and any minute sheâd topple.

The night Ben died sheâd toppled. Philip had held her up. To tell him now that she couldnât marry himâ¦

What was she thinking? He was a good, kind man and next Saturday sheâd marry him and right now she was going to sit in front of the television and stitch a last row of lace onto the hem

of her wedding gown. The gown should be finished but her mother and Philipâs mother had looked at it and decreed one more row.

âTo make everything perfect.â

Fine. Lace. Perfect. She could do this.

She let Kleppy out of the bedroom. He seemed a bit subdued. She gave him a doggy chew and he snuggled onto the couch beside her.

Sheâd washed him again. He was clean. Or clean enough. So what if the occasional dog hair got on her dress? It didnât have to be that perfect. Life didnât have to be that perfect.

Marriage to Philip would be okay.

The doorbell rang. Kleppy was off the couch, turning wild circles, barking his head off at the door.

He hadnât stirred from his spot on her bed when Philip had rung the bell. Different bell technique?

She should tuck Kleppy back in her bedroom. Thisâd be her mother. Or Philipâs mother. Philip would have reported the headache, gathered the troops. It was a wonder the chicken soup hadnât arrived before this.

Her mother would be horrified at the sight of Kleppy. Sheâd just have to get used to him, she decided. Theyâd all have to get used to him. The chicken soup brigade.

But it wasnât the chicken soup brigade.

She opened the door. Sarah was standing on her doorstep holding a gift, and Raff was right behind her.

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See, that was just the problem. She had no idea why her heart did this weird leap at the sight of him. It didnât make sense. She should feel anger when she saw him. Betrayal and distress. Sheâd felt it for ten years but nowâ¦ Somehow distress was harder to maintain, and there was also this extra layer. Ofâ¦ hope?

She really didnât want to spend the rest of her life running into this man. Maybe she and Philip could move.

Maybe Raff should move. Why had he come back to Banksia Bay in the first place?

But Sarah was beaming a greetingâRaffâs sisterâAbbyâs friendâand Abby thought there were so many complexities in this

equation she couldnât get her head around them. Raff was caught as well as she was, held by ties of family and love and commitment.

His teenage folly had killed his best mate. He was trapped in this judgemental town, looking after the sister he loved.

For ten years sheâd felt betrayed by this man but she looked at him now and thought heâd been to hell and back. There were different forms of life sentence.

And heâd lostâ¦her?

Heâd never had her, she thought fiercely. Sheâd broken up with him before the crash. If she even started thinking of him that way againâ¦

The problem was, she was thinking. But the nightmare if she kept thinkingâ¦

Her parentsâ¦Philipâ¦ The way she felt herself, the aching void where Ben had beenâ¦

She was dealing with it. She had been dealing with it. If only he hadnât kissed herâ¦

âYouâre home,â Sarah said. She was holding a silver box tied with an enormous red ribbon. âYou took ages to answer. Raff said you probably werenât home. He said youâd be out gallâ¦ gallâ¦â

âGallivanting?â

âItâs what I said but I guess thatâs the wrong word,â Raff said. âYou wouldnât gallivant with Philip.â

She ignored him. She ignored that heart-stopping, dare-you twinkle. âHi, Sarah. Itâs lovely to see you. What do you have there?â

âWeâre delivering your present,â Sarah said. âBut Raff said youâd be out with Philip. We were going to leave it on the doorstep and go. But I heard Kleppy. Why arenât you out with Philip?â

âI had a headache.â

âVery wise,â Raff said, the gleam of mischief intensifying in those dark, dangerous eyes. âDinner with the Flanagans? Iâd have a headache, too.â

âHow did you know we were going out with the Flanagans?â She sighed. âNo. Donât tell me. This town.â

âSorry.â Raffâs mischief turned to a chuckle, deep and toe-curlingly sexy. âAnd sorry about the intrusion, but Sarah

wrapped your gift and decided she needed to deliver it immediately.â

âSo can we come in while you open it?â Sarah was halfway in, scooping up a joyful Kleppy on the way. But then she faltered. âDo you still have a headache?â Sarah knew all about headachesâAbby could see her cringe at the thought.

âAbby said she *had* a headache,â Raff said. âThatâs past tense, Sares. I reckon it was cured the minute Philip went to dinner without her.â

âWill you cut it out?â

âDo you still have a headache?â he asked, not perturbed at all by her snap.

âNo, butâ¦â

âThere you go. Sares, what if I leave you here for half an hour so you can watch the present-opening and play with Kleppy? Iâll pick you up at eight. Is that okay with you, Abby?â

It wasnât okay with Sarah.

âNo,â she ordered. âYou have to watch her open it. It was your idea. Youâll really like it, Abby. Ooh, and I want to help you use it.â

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So they both came in. Abby was absurdly aware that she had a police car parked in her driveway. Thatâd be reported to Philip in about two minutes, she thought. And to her parents. And to everyone else in this claustrophobic little town.

What was wrong with her? She loved this town and she was old enough to ignore gossip. Raff was here helping Sarah deliver a wedding gift. What was wrong with that?

Ten minutes tops and sheâd have him out of here.

But the gift took ten minutes to open. Sarah had wrapped it herself. Sheâd used about twenty layers of paper and about four rolls of tape.

âI should use you to design my police cells,â Raff said, grinning, as Abby ploughed her way through layer after layer after layer. âThis suckerâs not getting out any time soon.â

âItâs exciting,â Sarah said, wide-eyed with anticipation. âI wonder what it is?â

Uh-oh. Abby glanced up at Raff at that and saw a shaft of

pain. Short-term memoryâ¦ Sarah would have spent an hour happily wrapping this gift, but an hour was a long time. For her to remember what sheâd actually wrappedâ¦

There was no way Raff could leave this town, she conceded. Sarah operated on long-term memory, the things sheâd had instilled as a child. A new environmentâ¦a new home, new city, new friendsâ¦ Sarah would be lost.

Raff was as trapped here as she was.

But she wasnât trapped, she told herself sharply, scaring herself with the direction her thoughts were headed. She loved it here. She loved Philip.

She was almost at the end. One last snip andâ¦

Oooohâ¦

She couldnât stop the sigh of pure pleasure.

This was no small gift. It was a thing sheâd loved for ever.

It was Gran Finnâs pasta maker.

Colleen Finn had been as Irish as her name suggested. She was one of thirteen children and sheâd married a hard drinking bull of a man whoâd come to Australia to make a new start with no intention of changing his ways.

As a young bride, Gran had simply got on with it. And sheâd cooked. Every recipe she could get her hands on, Irish or otherwise.

Abby was about ten when the pasta maker had come into the house. Bright and shiny and a complete puzzle to them all.

âGreta Riccardoâs having a yard sale, getting rid of all her motherâs stuff.â Gran was puffed up like a peahen in her indignation. âAll Mariaâs recipesâbooks and booksâand hereâs Greta saying she never liked Italian food. Thatâs like me saying I donât like potatoes. How could I let the pasta maker go to someone who doesnât love it? In honour of my friend Maria, weâll learn to be Italian.â

It was in the middle of the school holidays and the kids, en masse, were enchanted. Theyâd watched and helped, and within weeks theyâd been making decent pasta. Abby remembered holding sheets of dough, stretching it out, competing to see who could make the longest spaghetti.

Pasta thus became a staple in the Finn house and it was only as she grew older she realised how cheap it must have been.

With her own eggs and her home grown tomatoes, Gran had a new basic food. But nowâ¦

âDonât you use this any more?â she ventured, stunned they could give away this part of themselves, and Raff smiled, though his smile was a little wary.

And, with the wariness, Abby got it.

She remembered Sarah as a teenager, stretching dough, kneading it, easing it through the machine with care so it wouldnât rip, making angelsâ hair, every kind of the most delicate pasta varieties.

She thought of Sarah now, with fumbling fingers, knowing what sheâd been able to do, knowing what sheâd lost.

âWe donât use it any more,â Sarah said. âBut we donât want to throw it away. So Raff said why donât we give it to you and I can come round and remind you how to do it.â

âWill you and I make some now?â she asked Sarah before she could stop herself. âCan you remember how to make it?â

âI think so,â Sarah said and looked doubtfully at her big brother. âCan I, Raff?â

âMaybe we could both give Abby a reminder lesson,â Raff said. âAs part of our wedding present. If your headacheâs indeed better, Abigail?â

Both? Whoa. No. Uh-uh.

This was really dumb.

The police car would be parked outside for a couple of hours.

âYou want me to drive the car round the back?â he asked.

She stared at him and he gazed straight back. Impassive. Reading her mind?

This was up to her. All she had to do was say her headache had come back.

They were all looking at her. Sarah. Kleppy.

Raff.

Go away. Youâre complicating my life. My wedding dress is right behind that door. My fiancÃ© is just over the far side of town.

Sarahâs eyes were wide with hope.

âI guess itâll still get around that my car was round the back for a couple of hours,â Raff said, watching the warring emotions on her face. âWill Dexter call me out at dawn?â

âPhilip,â she said automatically.

âPhilip,â he agreed. Neutral.

âHe wonât mind,â she said.

âIâd mind if I was Philip.â

âJust lucky youâre not Philip,â she said and sheâd meant to sound snarky but she didnât quite manage it. âWhy donât you go do what you need to do and come back in a couple of hours?â

âBut Raff likes making pasta, too,â Sarah said and Abby looked at his face and sawâ¦and saw that he did.

There was a lot of this man to back away from. There was a lot about this man to distrust. But watching him nowâ¦ It was as if he was hungry, she thought. He was disguising it, with his smart tongue and his teasing and his blatant provocation, but stillâ¦

Heâd just given away his grandmotherâs pasta maker. Heâd given it to her.

Sheâd love it. Sheâd use it for ever. The memoriesâ¦ She and Sarah, Raff and Ben, messing round in Granâs kitchen.

If it wasnât for this man, Ben would still be here.

How long did hate last?

For the last ten years, every time sheâd looked at Raff Finn sheâd felt ill. Nowâ¦ She looked at Sarah and at the pasta maker. She thought of Mrs Fryerâs vitriol. She thought that Ben had been Raffâs best friend. Ben had loved him.

Sheâd loved him.

She couldnât keep hating. She justâ¦couldnât.

She felt sick and weary and desperately sad. She feltâ¦wasted.

âHey, Abby really isnât well,â Raff said and maybe heâd read the emotionsâmaybe it was easy because she was having no luck disguising them from herself, much less from him. âMaybe we should go, Sares, and let her recover.â

âDo you really have a headache?â Sarah put her hand on her arm, all concern. âDoes it bang behind your eyes? Itâs really bad when it does that.â

Did Sarah still have headaches? Did Raff cope with them, take care of her, ache for his little sister and all sheâd lost?

Maybe she should have invited Raff to her wedding.

Now there was a stupid thing to think. She might be coming out the other side of a decade of bitterness but her parentsâ¦they never would. They knew that Raff had killed their son, pure and

simple.

Philip would never countenance him at their wedding. Her parents would always hate him.

Any bridges must be her own personal bridges, built of an understanding that she couldnât keep stoking this flame of bitterness for the rest of her life.

They were watching her. Sarahâs hand was still on her arm. Concerned for her headache. Sarah, whose headaches had taken away so muchâ¦

âNot a headache,â she whispered and then more strongly, âitâs not a headache. Itâs justâ¦ Iâm overwhelmed. I loved making pasta with you guys when I was a kid. I canât believe youâre giving this to me. Itâs the most wonderful giftâa truly generous gift of the heart. Itâs made me feel all choked up.â

And then, as Sarah was still looking unsure, she took her hands and tugged her close and kissed her. âThank you,â she whispered.

âRaff, too,â Sarah said.

Raff, too. He was watching with eyes that were impassive. Giving nothing away.

Heâd given her his grandmotherâs pasta maker.

Heâd killed her brother.

No. An accident had killed Ben. A moment of stupidity that heâd have to pay for forever.

She took a deep breath, released Sarah, took Raffâs hands in hers and kissed him, too. Lightly. As sheâd kissed Sarah.

On the cheek and nothing more.

She went to release him but he didnât release her. His hands held for just a fraction of a second too long. A fraction of a second that said he was as confused as she was.

A fraction of a second that said there could never be idle friendship between them.

No longer enemies? But what?

Not friends. Not when he looked at her likeâ¦ Like he was seeing all the regret in the world.

She had to do something. They were all looking at herâ Raff, Sarah and Kleppy. Wondering why her eyes were brimmingâwhy she was standing like a dummy wishing the last ten years could disappear and she could be seventeen again and Raff could be gorgeous and young and free andâ¦

And she neednât think anything of the kind. In eight days she was marrying Philip. Her direction was set.

Eight days was all very well, but what about now?

Now she closed her eyes for a fraction of a second, gave herself that tiny respite to haul herself togetherâand then she put on her very brightest smile.

âLetâs make pasta,â she said, and they did.

CHAPTER SEVEN

HE SHOULDNâT have given the pasta maker away if it made him feel like this.

This was a bad idea and it was getting worse.

He was sitting at Abbyâs kitchen table watching Sarah hold one end of the pasta dough as Abby fed it through the machine. Watching it stretch. Watching Sarah hold her breath, gasp with pleasure, smile.

Watching Abby smile back.

He could helpâSarah kept offering him a turnâbut he excused himself on the grounds that all Abbyâs aprons were frilly and there was no way Banksia Bayâs cop could be caught in a rose-covered pinny.

But in reality he simply wanted to watch.

Heâd forgotten how good it was to watch Abby Callahan.

Had she forgotten how to be Abby Callahan?

For years now, heâd never seen her with a hair out of place. Now, though, she was wearing faded jeans, an old sweatshirt smudged with flour, bare feet.

He remembered her in bare feet.

Abby. Seventeen years old. Sheâd laugh and everyone laughed with her. She could tease a smile out of anyone. She was a laughing, loving girl.

Sheâd been his girlfriend and heâd loved it. They just seemed toâ¦fit.

But then theyâd grown up. Sort of.

One heated weekend. Angry words. The car. The debutante ball. Incredibly important to teenagers.

Abby had started dating Philip. She and Philip had broken up, and then Sarah had started going out with him.

He hadnât liked that, either. Maybe heâd acted like a jerk, making Abby pay. Heâd assumed theyâd make it up.

But thenâ¦ The tragedy that turned Abby from a girl whoâd

dreamed of being a dress designer, who lived for colour and life, into a lawyer who represented the likes of Wallace Baxter.

A lawyer who was about to marry Philip Dexter.

No.

He came close to shouting it, to thumping his fist down on the flour-covered table.

He did no such thing. There was no reason why she shouldnât marry Philip. There was nothing Raff could put his finger on against the guy. Philip was a model citizen.

He didnât like him.

Jealous?

Yeah. But something else. A feeling?

A feeling heâd had at nineteen that had never gone away.

âWhy did you and Dexter stop going out?â he asked as the pasta went through a third and final time.

She didnât lift her head but he saw the tiny furrow of concentration, the setting of her lips.

âAbby?â

âJust ease it in a little more, Sarah.â

âTen years ago. After your debut. Why did you break up?â

âThatâs none of your business. Now we put this attachment on to cut it into ribbons.â

âI know,â Sarah said, crowing in triumph as she found the right attachment. âThis one.â

âItâs just Iâve always wondered,â Raff said as Sarah tried to get the attachment in. They both let her be. Itâd be easier to step in and do it for herâher fingers were fumbling badlyâbut she was a picture of intense concentration and to step in nowâ¦

They both knew not to.

âYou know I only went out with Debbie Macallroy to get back at you,â he said.

âSo you did. Childhood romances, Raff. We were dumb.â

Really dumb. Where had they all ended up?

âWe did have fun before the crash,â he said gently. âWe were such good friends. But then Philipâ¦ First you and then Sarah. But you didnât fall in love with him then. You ditched him.â

âIâve changed. We both have.â

âPeople donât change.â

âOf course they do.â

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Of course people changed. She had, and so had Philip.

She didnât look up at Raff; she focused on the sheets of pasta, making sure they were dusted so they wouldnât stick in the final cutting process.

She thought back to Philip at nineteen.

Heâd been rich, or rich compared to every other kid in Banksia Bay. He had his own car and it was a far cry from the bomb Ben and Raff were doing up. A purple Monaro V8. Cool.

Every girl in Abbyâs year group had wanted to go out with him. Abby didnât so muchâshe was trying hard not to think she was still in love with Raffâbut sheâd needed a partner for her debut, all Raff thought about was his stupid car, and Sarah had bet her she wouldnât be game to ask him.

For a few weeks sheâd preened. Her friends were jealous. Philip danced really well and her debut was lovely.

But what followedâ¦the drive-in moviesâ¦ Sitting in the dark with Philipâ¦ Not so cool. Nothing she could put her finger on, though. It was just he wasnât Raff and that was no reason to break up with him.

But finallyâ¦

Theyâd gone for a drive one afternoon, heading up Black Mountain to the lookout. She hadnât wanted to go, she remembered, and when theyâd had a tyre blowout sheâd been relieved.

She hadnât been so relieved when they realised Philipâs spare tyre was flat. Or when he thought she should walk back into town to fetch his fatherâbecause he had to look after the car.

âNo way am I trudging back to town while you sit here in comfort,â she retorted. âYouâre the dummy who didnât check his spare.â

Not so tactful, even for a seventeen-year-old, but she was reaching the point where she wanted to end it.

Philip left her. Bored, she tried out the sound system. His tapes were boring, top ten stuff, nothing she enjoyed.

She flicked through his tape boxâa box just like the one that graced her bedside table, beautiful cedar with slots for every cassette. His grandpa really was great.

Boring cassettes. Boring, boring. But, at the back, some unmarked ones. She slid one in and heard the voice of Christabelle Thomas, a girl in the same class as her at school.

âPhilip, we shouldnât. My mumâd kill me. Philipâ¦â

Enough. She met Philip and his father as she stomped down the mountain, fuming.

âYou were supposed to stay with the car,â Philip told her.

âI didnât like the music,â she snapped, and held up the tape and threw it at him through his fatherâs car window. âPut the ripped up tape in my letterbox tomorrow or Iâm telling Christabelle.â

Why think of that now?

Because of Raff?

She glanced up and he was watching her. Sarah was watching her.

âWhatâs wrong?â Sarah asked, and she came back to the present and realised Sarah had successfully put the cutting tool in place.

âHey, fantastic, letâs cut,â she said, and the moment had passed. The time had passed. The tapes had been an aberration.

Philip had brought the tape round the next morning, cut to shreds.

âHey, Abby, I need to tell you Iâm sorry. Christabelle and I only went out a couple of times, well before you and me. Itâs not what you think. I only asked to kiss her. And I hadnât realised the tape was on record. I record stuff in the car all the time on the trip between here and SydneyâI try and recall study notes and then see how accurate Iâve been. I must have forgotten this was still on. Iâm so sorry you found it.â

It was okay, she conceded. It was a mistake. Kids did stupid things.

Like driving on the wrong side of the road?

âWhatâs wrong?â Sarah asked again and Raffâs eyes were asking the same question.

âSorry,â she said. âI just started thinking about all the things I had to do before the wedding.â

âYou want us to go home?â Sarah asked, and Abby winced and got a grip.

âNo way. Iâm hungry. Pasta, here we come. What setting

shall we have it on? Do we want angelsâ hair or tagliatelle?â

âAngelsâ hair,â Sarah said.

âMy favourite,â Raff said. âIt always has been.â

She glanced up and he was looking straight at her. He wasnât smiling.

Raffâ¦

Donât, she told herself but she wasnât quite sure what she was saying *donât* to.

All she knew was that this man meant trouble. He was surely causing trouble now.

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They left at nine, which gave her an hour to clean the kitchen and to get her thoughts in order before Philip arrived.

He arrived promptly at ten. Kleppy met him at the door and growled.

He hadnât growled at Raff and Sarah, but then he knew they were friends.

He didnât yet know Philip was a friend.

âIf he bitesâ¦â Philip said.

âHe wonât bite. Heâs being a watchdog.â

âI thought you had a headache,â Philip said, wary and irritated. âI hear Finn and his sister have been here.â

She sighed. She lived in Banksia Bay. She should be used to this.

âSarah brought our wedding present. She wanted to demonstrate.â

âDemonstrate what?â

âHer granâs pasta maker. You need to see it, Philip. Itâs cool.â

âA second-hand pasta maker?â

âItâs an heirloom.â

âPasta makers arenât heirlooms.â

âThis one is.â She gestured to the battered silver pasta maker taking pride of place on her bench. âWeâll make pasta once a week for the rest of our lives. When weâre finally in our nursing home weâll discuss the virtues of each of our children and decide who most deserves our fantastic antique pasta maker. If our children are unworthy weâll donate it to the State Gallery as a

National Treasure.â

He didnât even smile. âYou said you had a headache.â

âI did have a headache.â

âBut you let them in.â

âIt was Sarah,â she said, losing patience. âHer granâs pasta maker means a lot to her. She was desperate to see me using it.â

âYou werenât well enough to come out to dinner.â

âIf it was necessary I would have come,â she snapped. âIt wasnât. It was, however, absolutely necessary for me to show Sarah that her grandmotherâs pasta maker will be appreciated.â

âAnd Finn?â

âYou mean Raff?â

âOf course I mean Raff. Finn.â

âHe brought Sarah here. He watched.â

âI donât see how you can bear that man to be in the house.â

âI can bear a lot for Sarah.â

âEven having a dog foisted onto you.â

Kleppy growled again and Abby felt like growling herself. âPhilipâ¦â

And, just like that, he caved. He put his hands up in mock surrender, tossed his jacket over the back of a kitchen chair and hugged her. Kissed her on the forehead.

âSorry. Sorry, sorry. I know you had no choice. I know you wouldnât let Finn in unless you had no choice.â

Of course she wouldnât.

âTell me about tonight,â she said, and he sat and she made him coffee and he told her all about the fantastic business opportunities theyâd discussedâprojects of mutual benefit that needed careful legal input if they were to get past council.

And all the whileâ¦ Things were changing.

Some time in the last twenty-four hours the buried question had surfaced in her head and it was getting louder and louder until it was almost a drumbeat.

Why am I marrying this man?

The question was making her feel dizzy.

A week on Saturday sheâd be married to Philip.

Uh-oh.

This was Raffâs fault, she thought, feeling desperate. Raff asking herâ¦

Why did you and Dexter stop going out?

Sheâd shoved that memory away ten years ago, not to be thought of again. Remembering it nowâ¦ How sheâd feltâ¦

Underneath the logic, did she still feel like that?

This was like waking from a coma. A million emotions were crowding in. Memories. Stupid childhood snatches. Laughter, trouble, tears, adventure, funâ¦

Always with Raff.

âPhilip, Iâ¦â

âYou need to go to bed,â he said, immediately contrite. He rose. âIâm sorry, I forgot the headache. You should have said. Just because Finn barges his way in, welcome or notâ¦ I have a bit more finesse. You sleep well and Iâll see you in the morning. Breakfast at the yacht club? You want to come sailing afterwards?â

âMumâs organised the girlsâ lunch at midday.â

âOf course. So much to planâ¦â

So much to plan? This wedding had been organised for years.

âSleep well, sweetheart,â he told her and stooped and kissed her. Dry. Dusty. He reached for his jacketâ¦

And paused. Frowned. Felt the pockets. âMy wallet.â

âYour wallet?â

âIt was in my side pocket.â

âCould you have dropped it?â

âIt was there when I got out of the car.â He opened the front door and stared out at the path. The front light showed the path smooth and bare. âI always check I have my phone and my wallet when I get in and out of the car.â

Of course. Caution was Philipâs middle name.

âIâm sure I didnât drop it,â he said.

Which leftâ¦ She swivelled and looked for Kleppy.

Kleppy was at her bedroom door. He had something on the floor in front of him.

A wallet? Too big?

She walked over to see and he wagged his tail and beamed up at her. She was sure it was a beam. It might be the stupidest beam on the planet but it was strangely adorable.

âWhat have you got?â

It wasnât the wallet. It was her jewellery box, the cedar box Philipâs grandfather had given her. Her heart sank. If heâd

chewed itâ¦

He hadnât.

How had he got it down from the bedside table?

There wasnât a mark on it. He had his paw resting proprietorially on its lid but when she bent down and took it he quivered all over with that stupid canine beam. *Arenât I fantastic? Look what I found for you!*

âThat dogâ¦â Philip said in a voice full of foreboding.

âHe doesnât have it,â she said. âButâ¦â

She looked more closely at Kleppy. Then she looked at her bed.

Kleppy had retrieved the box via the bed. She had a pale green quilt on her bed. The coverlet was now patterned with footprints.

She bent down and looked at Kleppyâs paws.

Dirt.

Uh-oh, uh-oh, uh-oh.

She looked out through the glass doors to the garden. To the fence. To where sheâd dug in netting all the way along.

Lots of lovely loose soil. A great place to bury something.

Loose dirt was scattered over the grass in half a dozen places. Kleppy, it seemed, had been a little indecisive in his burial location.

âYouâre kidding me,â Philip said, guessing exactly what had happened.

âUh-oh.â What else was a girl to say?

âYou expect me to dig?â

âNo.â Sheâd had enough. She was waking from a bad dream and this was part of it.

âIâll find it,â she told him. âIâll give it to you in the morning.â

âClean.â

âClean,â she snapped. âOf course.â

âItâs not my fault the stupidâ¦â

âItâs not your fault,â she said, cutting him off. It never was. Of all the childishâ¦

No. She was being petulant herself. She needed to get a grip. She needed to find the wallet and then think through what was important here. She needed to decide how she could do the unimaginable.

âOf course itâs not your fault,â she said more gently and she headed outside to start sifting dirt. âI took Kleppy on. Iâm responsible. Go home, Philip, and let me sort the damage my way.â

âI can helpâ¦â he started, suddenly unsure, but she shook her head.

âMy headacheâs come back,â she said. âI can use a bit of quiet digging. And thinking.â

âWhat do you need to think about?â

âWeddings,â she said. âAnd pasta makers. And dogs.â

And other stuff she wasnât even prepared to let into the corners of her mind until Philip was out of the door.

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She dug.

She should have thought and dug, but she just dug. Her mind felt as if it had been washed clear, emptied of everything.

What was happening? Everything sheâd worked for over the last ten years was suddenlyâ¦nothing.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

This is just pre-wedding nerves, she told herself. But she knew it was more.

She dug.

It was strangely soothing, delving into the soft loam, methodically sifting. She should be wearing gardening gloves. Sheâd worn gardening gloves this afternoon when sheâd laid the netting, but that was when it mattered that she kept her nails nice. That was when she was going to get married.

There was a scary thought. She sat back on her heels and thought, *Did I just think that?*

How could she not get married?

Her dress. Two years in the making. Approximately two thousand beads.

Two hundred and thirty guests.

People were coming from England. People had already come from England.

Her spare room was already filling with gifts.

Sheâd have to give back the pasta maker.

And that was the thing that made her eyes suddenly fill with

tears. It made her realise the impossibility of doing what she was thinking of.

Handing Raff Finn back the pasta maker and saying, *Here, I canât accept itâIâm not getting married.*

Why Raff? Why was his gift so special?

She knew why. She knewâ¦

The impossibility of what she was thinking made her choke. This was stupid. Nostalgia. Childhood memories.

Not all childhood memories. Raff yesterday at the scene of the accident, standing in front of her car, giving orders.

Raff, caring about old Mrs Ford.

Raffâ¦

âWe always wish for what we canât have,â she muttered to herself and shoved her hand deep into the loam so hard she hit the wire netting and scraped her knuckles.

She hauled her hand out and an edge of leather came with it.

She stared down at her skinned knuckle and Philipâs wallet.

She needed a hug.

âKleppy,â she called. âI found it. You want to come lick it clean?â

Fat chance. It was a joke. She should be smiling.

She wasnât smiling.

âKleppy?â

Heâd be back on her bed, she thought. How long till he came when she called?

âKleppy?â She really did want a hug. She wiped away the dirt and headed inside.

No Kleppy.

How many hiding places were there? Where was he?

Not here.

Not in the house.

The front door was closed. He could hardly have opened it and walked out. He was clever but notâ¦

Memory flooded back. Philip, throwing open the door to stare at the front path. Sheâd gone to look for Kleppy, then sheâd headed straight out to the garden.

Philip leaving. Slamming the door behind him.

The door had been open all the time theyâd talked.

Her heart sank. She should have checked. Sheâd been too

caught up with her own stupid crisis, her own stupid pre-wedding jitters.

Kleppy was gone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ABBY searched block by block, first on foot and then fetching the car and broadening her search area.

How far could one dog get in whatâhalf an hour? More? How long had she sat out in the garden angsting about what she should or shouldnât be doing with her life?

How had one dog made her question herself?

Where was he?

She wanted to wake up the town and make them search, but even her friendsâ¦ To wake them at midnight and say, *Please, can you help me find a stray dog?* was unthinkable.

Theyâd think she was nuts.

Sarah wouldnât think she was nuts. Or Raff. Her friendsâ¦

She thought of the kids sheâd messed around with when she was a kid. Theyâd dropped away as she was seen as Philipâs girl. Philipâs partner. Philipâs wife?

Those who remainedâ¦ She winced, wondering how sheâd isolated herself. Sheâd done it without thinking. How many years had she simply been moving forward with no direction? Or in Philipâs direction. So now, who did she call when she was in the kind of trouble Philip disapproved of?

She knew who.

No.

She searched for another hour.

One oâclock.

This was crazy. She couldnât do it by herself.

Do not go near Raff Finn. That man is trouble. It had been a mantra in her head for years but now it had changed. Trouble had taken on a new dimensionâa dimension she wasnât brave enough to think about.

She pushed the thought of Raff away and kept searching. Wider and wider circles. A small dog. Heâd be safe until morning, she told herself. He had street smarts. He was a stray.

He wasnât a stray. He was Isaac Abrahamsâ loved dog. He wore his ownerâs medal of valour on his collar.

He was *her* Kleppy.

She drove on. Round the town. She walked through the deserted mall. She walked out onto the wharves at the harbour.

And then? There was only one place left to search. Isaacâs.

Up the mountain in the dark? To Isaacâs? She hated that place. She couldnât.

He had to be somewhere. After this time, logic said that was where heâd be.

She couldnât make herself go alone. She justâ¦couldnât.

Donât do it.

Do it.

At two in the morning she phoned the police. The police singular.

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Raffâs patrol car pulled up outside her front door ten minutes after she called. He had the lights flashing.

He swung out of the car, six feet two inches of lethal cop. Ready for action.

Sheâd been parked, waiting for him. In the dark. Not wanting to wake the neighbours. His flashing lights lit the street and curtains were being pulled.

âTurn the lights off,â she begged.

âThis is Kleppy,â he said seriously. âI thought about sirens.â

âYou want to wake the town?â

âHow much do you want to find him?â

âA lot,â she snapped and then caught herself. âI meanâ¦please.â

âSo how did you lose him? You let him out?â

âIâ¦yes.â

He looked at her face and got an answer. âDexter let him out.â

âBy mistake.â

âIâm sure.â

âBy mistake,â she snapped.

âHow long ago?â

âThree hours.â

âThree hours? Youâve only just discovered heâs missing?â There was a whole gamut of accusation in his tone. Like what had she and Philip been doing for three hours that they hadnât noticed theyâd lost a dog?

âIâve been searching,â she said through gritted teeth. âCan we justâ¦ I donât knowâ¦â

âFind him?â he suggested, and suddenly his voice was gentle. The switch was nearly her undoing. She was so close to tears.

âYes. Please.â

âWhere have you looked?â

âEverywhere.â

âThat just about covers it. You sure heâs not under your bed? â

âIâm sure.â

âThatâs where we find most missing kids,â he said. âWithin two hundred yards of the family refrigerator.â

âYou want to look again?â

âI trust you. Is Dexter out hunting?â

Silence. She wasnât going to answer. She didnât need to answer.

âIâmâ¦Iâm sorry to call you out,â she ventured.

âThis is what I do.â

âHunt for lost dogs when you should be home with Sarah?â

âSarahâs used to me being out in the night. She has her dogs.â

âAre you on duty?â

âThis is a two cop town. When thereâs an emergency, Keith and I are both on.â

âThis is an emergency?â

âKleppyâs definitely an emergency,â he said. âHeâs a loved dog with an owner. I was never more relieved than when you said youâd take him on. For all sorts of reasons,â he said enigmatically, but then kept right on. âYou want to ride with me? Weâll check out Main Street. Morrisy Drapers is his favourite spot.â

âIâve been there. Itâs all locked up. The bargain bins are inside. No Kleppy.â

âYouâve what?â he demanded, brow snapping. âYou walked the mall alone?â

âThis is Kleppy.â

âAt two on a Saturday morning? Thereâs the odd drunk and nothing else in the mall.â

âYeah, and no Kleppy.â

His mouth tightened but he said nothing, turning the car towards the waterfront. âHe likes the harbour, our Kleppy. Isaacâs been presented with a live lobster before now. Isaac had to get Kleppyâs nose stitched but he got him home, live and fighting.â

âOh,â she said and choked on a bubble of laughter that was close to hysteria. âA lobster?â

âAlmost bigger than he was. Cost Isaac a hundred and thirty dollars for the lobster and another three hundred at the vetâs. They had a great dinner that night.â

He had his flashing lights on again now. He hit another switch and floodlights lit both sides of the road.

The law on the hunt.

âIâve checked the harbour,â she said in a small voice, already knowing the reaction sheâd get.

And she did.

âAlso by yourself.â His tone was suddenly angry. âHell, woman, you know the dropkicks go down there at night.â

âThey havenât seen Kleppy.â

âYou asked?â

âThis is Kleppy.â

âYou asked. You approached the low life that crawl round that place at night? Where the hell is Dexter?â

âIn bed,â she snapped. She caught herself, fighting back anger in response. âI know I should have phoned him but heâs notâ¦heâs not quite reconciled to having a dog.â

âWhich is why he left the door open.â

âHe did not do it deliberately.â

âYou make one stubborn defence lawyer,â he said more mildly and went back to concentrating on the sides of the road.

She fumed. Or she tried to fume. She was too tired and too worried to fume.

âHave you tried up the mountain?â Raff asked and she caught her breath.

The mountain.

Isaacâs place.

âNâ¦ No.â She swallowed. Time to confess. âThatâs whyâ¦thatâs why I called you.â

âYou didnât go up there?â

âI havenât. Not sinceâ¦â She paused. Tried to go on. Couldnât.

Tonight sheâd walked a deserted shopping mall. Tonight sheâd fronted a group of very drunk youths down at the harbour to ask if theyâd seen her dog.

But the place with the most fears was Kleppyâs home. Isaacâs place.

Up the mountain where Ben had been killed. To go there at nightâ¦

The last night sheâd been there would stay in her mind for ever. The phone call. The rain, the dark, the smell of spilled gasoline, the sight ofâ¦

âItâs just a place, Abby,â Raff said gently. âYou want to stay home while I check?â

âIâ¦no.â She had to get over this. Ten years. She was stuck in a time warp, an aching void of loss. âIâm sorry. You must hate going up there, too.â

âThereâs lots of things I hate,â he said softly. âBut going up the mountainâs not one of them. Itâs Isaacâs home. He was a great old guy.â

He was. She remembered Isaac the night of the accident. Of course heâd heard the crash; heâd been first on the scene. Heâd been cradling Ben when sheâd got there.

All the more reason to love his dog. All the more reason to face down her hatred of the place.

âYou know, you canât block it out for ever,â Raff said. âWork it through and move on.â

âLike you have.â She heard the anger in her words and flinched.

âLike I try to,â Raff said evenly. âIt always hurts but limboâs not my idea of a great time. You want to spend the rest of your life there?â

âWhatâs that supposed to mean?â

âMeaning youâve never come back,â he said. âYouâre as damaged as Sarah is in your own way.â

She shook her head. âNo. No, Iâm not. Iâm fine. Just find my dog, Raff.â

âIâll do my best,â he said gravely. âYou know, taking Kleppyâs a great start. Kleppyâs forcing chinks in your lawyerish armour and Iâm not so sure you can seal them up again. Letâs see if we can find him so he can go the whole way.â

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Isaacâs place was locked and deserted, a ramshackle homestead hidden in bushland. Through the fence, they could see Isaacâs garden, beautiful in the moonlight, but they couldnât get in the front gate. The gate was padlocked and a cyclone fence had been erected around the rickety pickets.

âIsaacâs daughterâs worried about vandalism before she can get the place on the market,â Raff said. âShe sacked the gardener, hired a security firm and put the fence up.â Raff headed off, striding around the boundary, searching the ground with his flashlight as well as through the fence. Abby had to run to catch up with him.

The ground was unsteady. Raffâs hand was suddenly holding hers. She should pull awayâbut she didnât.

âCall him,â Raff said.

She called, her voice ringing out across the bushland, eerie in the dark.

âKeep calling.â Raffâs hand held hers, strong and warm and pushing her to keep going.

âWeâll call from the other side,â he said. âIf heâs down nearer the roadâ¦â

Near the road where Ben was killed?

Move on. She did move on, and Raffâs hand gave her the strength to do it. How inappropriate was that?

But she called. And she called. And then, unbelievablyâ¦

Out through the bush, tearing like his life depended on it, Kleppy came flying. Straight to her.

She gasped and stooped to catch him and the little dog was in her arms, wriggling with joy. She was on her knees in the undergrowth, hugging. Maybe even weeping.

âHey, Klep,â Raff said, and she could hear his relief. âWhere have you been hiding?â

She hugged him tight and he licked herâ¦then suddenly he wrenched out of her arms, backed off and barkedâand tore back into the bush.

Raff made a lunge for him but he was too fast.

He disappeared back into the darkness.

âYou could have held his collar,â Raff said, but he didnât sound annoyed. He sounded resigned.

âOh, myâ¦â She started to run, but Raff put his hand out and stopped her.

âWe walk. We donât run. Wombat holes, logs, all sorts of traps for the unwary in the dark.â

âBut Kleppyâ¦â

âWonât have gone far,â he said, taking her hand firmly back into his. âYou saw himâhe was joyful to see you. This is Isaacâs place, Kleppyâs territory, but I reckon youâre his now. It seems youâre his person to replace Isaac. Thatâs a fair responsibility, Abby Callahan. I hope youâre up to it.â

âJust find him for me,â she muttered.

Kleppyâs person?

She didnât want to think about where that was taking her.

She didnât actually want to think at all.

Kleppy had headed back down the hill. Towards the road. They were now within two hundred yards of where the cars had crashed.

It had rained this week. The undergrowth smelled of wet eucalypt, scents of the night, scents she hated.

Sheâd never wanted to come back here.

âMove on,â Raff said, holding her hand tightly. âYou can.â She couldnât.

The thought that it had been Raff, the man holding her hand right nowâ¦

Raffâ¦

She could not depend on this man. This man was dangerous; he always had been. Heâd been dangerous to Ben. Now suddenly he seemed dangerous in an entirely different way.

But he was the one searching for Kleppy, not Philip.

That would have to be thought about tomorrow. For nowâ¦just get through tonight.

âIf heâs gone back down to the townâ¦â

âWhy would he do that? This is Isaacâs place. Youâre here. Everything he knows is here.â And then, before she could respond, his flashlight stopped moving and focused.

Kleppy was fifty yards from the road. Digging? He was nosing his way through the undergrowth, pawing at the damp earth, wagging, wriggling, diggingâ¦

âKleppyâ¦â she called and started towards him.

Kleppy looked up at herâand headed back in the direction heâd come from. Back to Isaacâs.

Raff sighed.

âYou donât make a very good cop,â he said. âLetting the suspect go. Sneaking up and then breaking into a run at the last minute.â

âWhatâs he doing?â They were following him again, back through the undergrowth. Once more, Raff had her hand. She absolutely should let it go.

She didnât.

âI suspect heâs one very confused dog,â Raff said. âHe knows where Isaac lived but he canât get in. Heâs forming new bonds to you but his allegiance will be tornâheâll still want Isaac. And whatâs back there buriedâ¦who knows? Some long hidden loot, or a wombat hole, or something he sniffed on the way past and thought was worth investigating. But nowâ¦ Heâs weighed everything upâyou, wombats, Isaacâand decided he needs to go back to his first love.â

And Raff was right. They emerged from the bush and Kleppy was waiting for themâor rather he was waiting for someone to open the gate.

His nose was pressed hard against the cyclone fencing and he whimpered as they approached. He was no longer running. He was no longer joyful to see them.

Abby knelt and scooped him up and he looked longingly at the darkened house.

âHeâs not there any more,â she whispered, burying her nose into his scruffy coat. âIâm sorry, Kleppy, but Iâm it. Will I do?â

âHeâll grow accustomed,â Raff said, and his voice was a bit roughâa bit emotional? âYou want me to take you both home?â

She looked at the darkened house, then turned and looked out towards the road, to where Ben had been snatched from her.

Heâll grow accustomed.

Ten yearsâ¦

Her parents would never forgive Raff Finn. How could she?

âItâs okay, Kleppy,â she whispered. âWeâll manage, you and I. Thank you, Raff. Weâd appreciate it if you took us home.â

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He drove them down from the mountain, a woman and her dog, and he felt closer to her tonight than he had for ten years.

Maybe it was what she was wearing. The normally immaculate lawyer-cum-Abby was wearing old jeans, a faded sweatshirt and her hair had long come loose from its normally elegant chignon. She still had flour on her face from pasta making. There were twigs in her hair.

Her face was tear-streaked and she was holding her dog as if she were drowning.

She made him feelâ¦

Like heâd felt at nineteen, when Abby had started dating Philip.

He and Abby had been girlfriend and boyfriend since they were fourteen and sixteen. Kid stuff. Not serious.

She hung round with Sarah so she was always in and out of the house. She was pretty and she laughed at his jokes. She was alwaysâ¦there.

Then heâd come home and she was dating Philip and the sense of loss had him gutted.

He should have told her how he felt then, only heâd been too proud to say, *Okay, Abby, wise choice, I know at seventeen you need to date a few people, see the world.*

Heâd been too proud to say that seeing her and Philip together had made him wake up to himself. Had made him realise that the sexiest, loveliest, funniest, happiest, most desirable woman in the world was Abby.

He had known it. It was justâ¦ He thought heâd punish her a little. He and Ben had even been a bit cool to herâBen had hated her dating Dexter as well.

Theyâd backed off. The night of the crash, where was Abby? Home, washing her hair?

Home, being angry with all of them.

That probably saved her life, but what was left afterwardsâ¦?

The sexiest, loveliest, funniest, happiest, most desirable woman in the entire world had been hidden under a load of grief so great it overwhelmed them all. Then she was hidden by layers of her parentsâ hopes, their fixation that Abby could make up for Ben, and their belief that Philip was the Ben they couldnât have.

Heâd watched for ten years as the layers had built up, until the Abby heâd once known, once loved, had been almost totally subsumed.

And there was nothing he could do about it because he was the one whoâd caused it.

He felt his fists harden on the steering wheel, so tight his knuckles showed white. One stupid moment and so many worlds shot to pieces. Ben and Sarah. And Abby, condemned to live for the rest of her life making up for his criminal stupidity.

âYou know I once loved you,â he said into the night and she gasped and hugged Kleppy tighter.

âDonât.â

âI wonât,â he said gently. âI canât. But, Abby, if I could wipe away that nightâ¦â

âAs if anyone could do that.â

âNo,â he said grimly. âAnd I know I have to live with it for the rest of my life. But you donât.â

âI donât know what you mean.â

âI mean you lost Ben that night,â he said. âFor which Iâm responsible and Iâll live with that for ever. But Ben was my mate and if he could see whatâs happening to you now heâd be sick at heart.â

There was a long silence. She wasnât talking. He was trying to figure out what exactly to say.

He had no right to say anything. Heâd forfeited that for sure, but thenâ¦

Forget himself, he thought. Forget everything except the fact that Ben had been his best friend and maybe he needed to put what he was feeling himself aside.

Make it about Ben, he told himself. Abby hated him already. Saying what he thought Ben would say couldnât make things worse.

âAbby, your parents and Dexterâs parents are thick as thieves,â he told her. âThey always have been. After the accident, your families practically combined. The Dexters had

Philip. The Callahans were left only with Abby. Two families, a son and a daughter. When Ben died you were about to go to university and study creative arts. Afterwards, Philip told you how sensible law was. Your mother told you how happy itâd make her to see you at the same law school as Philip. Philipâs dad told you heâd welcome you into his law firm. And you justâ¦rolled.â

âI did not roll,â she said but it was a whisper he knew didnât even convince herself.

âYou used to wear sweaters with stripes. You used to wear purple leggings. I loved those purple leggings.â

Silence.

âI never saw you wear purple leggings after Ben died.â

âSo I grew up.â

âWe all did that night,â he said gravely. âBut, Abby, you didnât just leave behind childhood. You left behindâ¦Abby.â

âIf you mean I left behind stupidity, yes, I did,â she snapped. âHow could I not? All those yearsâ¦ *Keep away from the Finn boy. Heâs trouble.* Thatâs what my mother said but I never listened. Not once did I listen and neither did Ben, and now heâs dead.â

He couldnât answer that.

The car nosed its way down the mountain. He could drive faster. He didnât.

Keep away from the Finn boy.

He knew Ben and Abby had been given those orders. He even knew why.

His grandfatherâs drunkenness. His motherâs lack of a wedding ring. His familyâs poverty.

The prissiness of Abbyâs parents, secure in their middle class home, with their neat front lawn and their nice children.

âI dunno about the Callahan kids.â He remembered Gran saying it when he was small as she tucked him into bed. âYou be careful, Raff, love. They donât fit with the likes of us.â

âTheyâre my friends.â

âAnd theyâre nice kids,â his gran had said. âBut one day theyâll move on. Donât let âem break your heart.â

As a kid, he didnât have a clue what she was talking about. Heâd figured it out as he got older, but Ben and Abby never let it happen. They simply ignored their parentsâ disapproval and he was a friend regardless.

But for how long? If Ben hadnât diedâ¦would Abby have gone out with him again?

And now she was a defence lawyer and he was a cop. Never the twain shall meet.

Except she was staring ahead with eyes that were blind with misery and she was heading into a marriage with Dexter and he couldnât bear it.

âIâm not talking about us now,â he said, and it was hard to keep his voice even. âAs you say, weâve both grown up and thereâs so much baggage between us thereâs never going to be a bridge to friendship. But Iâm not talking about me either, Abby. Iâm talking about you. You and Dexter. Heâs burying you.â

âHeâs not.â

âMrs Philip Dexter. Whereâs the Abby in that equation?â

âLeave it.â

âYou know itâs true. Would Mrs Philip Dexter ever spend the night trawling Banksia Bay looking for a dog?â

âOf course she would.â She gulped. âNo. That isâ¦Iâll hang onto Kleppy from now on.â

âAnd if Dexter leaves the door open?â

âHe wonât.â

âDonât do it, Abby.â

âButt out.â They were pulling up outside her house. She shoved the door open and hauled Kleppy out. She staggered a little, but straight away he was beside her, steadying her.

She was soâ¦soâ¦

She was Abby. All he wanted to do was fold her into his arms and hold her. Dog and all.

Heâd had ten years to stop feeling like this. He thought he had.

One stupid night hunting a kleptomaniac dog and he was feeling just what heâd felt ten years ago. As if here was the half to his whole. As if something had been ripped out of him ten years back and this woman was the key to getting his life back.

This wasnât about him. It couldnât be.

âThere are lots of guys out there, Abby,â he said in a voice that was none too steady. âGuys whoâd marry you in a heartbeat. Guys whoâd love Kleppy. Donât marry Dexter.â

âGet out of my way.â

âYouâre better than this, Abby.â

âWeâve had this conversation before. Philipâs better than any of us. He wasnât stupid. Heâs dependable.â

âHeâs boring. He doesnât like this town.â

âHow can you say that? He lives for this town.â

âHe spends his life criticising it. Making reasons why he should go to conferences far away. Where are you going on your honeymoon?â

âYouâre suggesting we should honeymoon at Mrs Macâs Banksia Bayâs Big Breakfast?â

âNo, butâ¦â

âThatâs what Iâd have done if Iâd married you.â

Her words shocked them both.

If Iâd married youâ¦

The unsayable had just been said.

The unthinkable had just been put out there.

âAbbyâ¦â

âDonât,â she said and pushed and Kleppy got caught in the middle and yelped his indignation. âNow see what youâve done.â

Kleppy wagged his tail. Wounded to the core.

âThink about it,â he said, but softly, knowing heâd gone too far; heâd pushed into places neither of them could contemplate going.

âIâve thought about it. Thank you very much for your help tonight.â

âAny time, Abby, and I mean that.â

âIâve accepted all the help from you Iâll ever accept.â

âYou canât say that. What if you need help over the street in your old age? There Iâll be in my fading cop uniform, all ready to hold up the traffic, and there youâll be with your pride and your walking frame. *Donât you stop the traffic for me, young manâ¦*â

She gasped and choked, laughter suddenly surfacing at the image.

âThatâs better,â he said. âAbby, can we be friends?â

Friends. She looked at him and the laughter faded. Her eyes were indescribably bleak.

âNo.â

âBecause of Ben?â

âBecause of much, much more than that.â

âDonât go near the Finn boy. Heâs trouble?â he said.

âMore than that, too,â she whispered. âYou know Iâ¦ You know weâ¦â

He didnât know anything, and he couldnât bear it. She was looking at him with eyes that were so bleak the end of the world must be around the corner, not the marriage of the year, Banksia Bayâs answer to a royal coupleâa wedding that had been planned almost since she was a baby.

She hesitated for just a fraction of a second too long and logic and reason and everything else he should be thinking flew straight out of the window.

He took her shoulders in his hands. He tugged her to himâdog includedâand he kissed her.

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One minute she was angry and confused, intending to wheel away and stalk into the house, dignity intact.

The next minute she was being kissed by Raff Finn and her dignity was nowhere.

Second time in two days? She felt as if her body had opened to this two days ago and sheâd been waiting for a repeat performance ever since.

Only this wasnât a repeat performance. Tonight sheâd been scared and lonely and emotional, remembering so much stuff that her head was close to exploding even before Raffâs mouth met hers.

It was no wonder that when it did she couldnât handle it.

She liked control. She was a control girl. Her emotional wiring was neat and orderly.

His mouth touched hers and every single fuse blew, just like that.

Her circuits closed down and every one of the emotions sheâd been feeling during the night was replaced, overridden by one gigantic wire that sizzled and sparked and threatened to blow her tidy existence right out of the water.

Raff Finn was kissing her.

She was kissing Raff Finn.

Orâ¦maybe she wasnât kissing. She was simply dissolving into him.

Ten long years of control, ten years of carefully recreating her life, was forgotten. All she could feel was this man. His hands. His mouth. The taste of him, the smell, the sheer testosterone-laden charge of him.

Raff. The man who was kissing her totally, unutterably, mind-blowingly senseless.

She had sensations within her right now that she didnât know existed. She didnât know feeling like this was possible. If she hadâ¦

If she had, sheâd have gone hunting for them with elephant guns.

Ohâ¦

Did she gasp? Did she moan?

Who knew? All she knew was that her mouth was locked on his and the kiss went on and on and she didnât care. She didnât care that it was three in the morning and she was engaged to Philip Dexter and Raff Finn was a man her family hated. Raff Finn, six foot two, was holding her and kissing her until her toes curled, until her mind was empty of anything but the taste of him.

This was a pure primeval need. It had nothing to do with logic. It had everything to do with here and now. And Raffâa man sheâd wanted since she was eight years old.

Here, now andâ¦andâ¦

âIs that you? Abigail?â

Uh-oh.

This was Banksia Bay.

It was three in the morning.

She lived next door to Ambrose Kittelty and Ambrose watched American sports television all night on Pay TVâas well as watching out of his front window.

Banksia Bay. Where her life was never her own. Could never be her own.

âItâs Abby all right.â Somehow, Finn was putting her away from him and she could have wept. To have him so closeâ¦ To know she could neverâ¦ Must neverâ¦

âIs she kissing you?â Mr Kittelty sounded almost apoplectic.

âBit of trouble with a dog,â Raff said smoothly. âIâm helping the lady get him under control.â

âYou looked likeâ¦â

âTook two of us to get him settled. Seems okay now. You right, maâam?â

âThatâs Abrahamsâ dog,â Ambrose said.

âYes, sir, the same dog that took your boot from the bowling club,â Finn said. âStill causing trouble.â

âGet him put down,â Ambrose said and slammed down the window.

âI didnât know Ambrose and Phil were related,â Raff said and any last vestige of passion disappeared, just like that.

She felt cold and tired and stupid. Very, very stupid.

âThank you for tonight,â she said, and she couldnât keep the weariness from her voice. âDonâtâ¦â

âCome near you any more?â

âThatâs right,â she whispered. âThereâs too much at stake.â

âYour marriage to Philip?â

âYou know itâs much more than that.â

âFirst things first, Abby,â he said softly. âFigure the marriage thing out and everything else can come later.â

âNot with you, it canât.â

âI know that.â

âSo goodnight,â she said and she hugged her dog closeâa wild dog this, he hadnât even wriggled while her brain had been short-circuitingâand she walked inside with as much dignity as she could muster.

She closed the door as if she was trying not to wake a household.

There was no household. Just Abby and Kleppy and one magnificent wedding dress.

âWhat will I do?â she whispered and she leaned back against the closed door. âKleppy, help me out here.â

Kleppyâs butt wriggled until she set him on the floor. He headed into the bedroom while she stood motionless, trying not to think.

Kleppy headed straight back to her. Carrying her jewellery box.

He set it down at her feet and wriggled all over.

See? She had a guy whoâd steal for her.

What more did a girl want?

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Raff drove half a mile before he pulled over to the side of the road. He needed time to think.

He didnât have the head space to think.

Abby, Abby, Abby. Ten yearsâ¦

Heâd been busy telling Abby she should move on. Could he?

Heâd dated other womenâof course he had. Heâd set himself up with a life, of sorts. Living in this town. Keith, his partner, was getting long in the tooth. Keith was senior sergeant but, for all intents and purposes, Raff was in charge of the policing in this town. When Keith retired, Raff would be it.

Not bad for a Boy Who Meant Trouble.

He was still judged by some in this town, but only as someone whose background made people sniff, whoâd been stupid in his youth. He was accepted as a decent cop. Sarah had friends, support groups, the farm she loved.

He had everything he needed in life, right there.

Except Abby.

How did you tell a woman you loved her?

He couldnât. To lay that on herâ¦ There was no way she could take it anywhere. They both knew that.

This thing between themâ¦

He shouldnât have kissed her. It reminded him that it was more than a kidâs dreaming. It was as real today as it had been the first time heâd kissed her. Life had been ahead of them, exciting, wonderful. Anything had been possible.

But to love Abby nowâ¦

Sheâd closed herself off. After Benâs death sheâd simply shut down, retired into her parentsâ world, into Philipâs world, and sheâd never emerged. She was junior partner in Banksia Bayâs legal firm. She was Philipâs fiancÃ©e. Next Saturday sheâd be Philipâs wife.

The wasteâ¦

Do you want to marry her yourself?

The thought was enough to make him smile, only it wasnât a happy smile. Heâd faced facts years ago. Even if she could shake off the past, to live with her parentsâ condemnation, with the knowledge that every time she looked at him she was seeing

Benâ¦

Theyâd destroy each other.

A couple of kids drove pastâLexy Netherland driving his dadâs new Ford. He bet Old Man Netherland didnât know Lexy was out on the tear. He had Milly Parker in the passenger seat. Theyâd be going up the mountain, to the lookout. Only not to look out.

Kids, falling in love.

He could put the sirens on, pull âem over, send âem home with their tails between their legs.

No way could he do that. It wasnât long before theyâd be adults. The world would catch up with them and theyâd be accepting life as it had to be.

As he had.

Loving Abby. Then Benâs death. Then the other side, where the woman he loved could never find the courage to move on.

He knew she was having doubtsâhow could he kiss her and not sense it? Maybe if he pushed harder he could stop this marriage. But then what? What would he be doing to her?

Heâd pushed her already to look seriously at the life she was facing. There was nothing else he could do. For Ben. For himself.

He put his head on the steering wheel and thumped it. Hard. Three times.

The third time he hit the horn and the dogs in Muriel Blakeâs backyard started barking to wake the dead.

Time to move on, then?

Back to Sarah.

Back home.

Where to move forward in this town?

There was never a forward.

CHAPTER NINE

HOW to sleep after a night like this? She did at last, but not until dawn. She woke and it was ten oâclock and sheâd been meant to meet Philip for breakfast at the yacht club.

She phoned and he was fine.

âNo problem. I have three newspapers and Donâs here with his plans for the new supermarket. As long as itâs safe and clean, I can do without my wallet until later. Iâve hardly realised you werenât here.â

That was supposed to make her feel better?

She showered slowly, washed her hair, took a long time drying it.

Kleppy watched, looking anxious.

âIâm not going anywhere today where I canât take you,â she told him. âItâs the weekend.â

He still looked anxious. He climbed onto her bed, and then onto the dressing table. Wriggled himself a spot next to her cedar box. His new favourite thing.

âI guess last night upset you,â she told him, abandoning her hairdryer to give him a hug. âIâm so sorry about Isaac. Itâs horrid loving someone and losing them.â

Like she had.

Like Raff had.

It was Raffâs fault.

But that mantra, said over and over in her head for ten years, sounded hollow and sad and bleak as deathâa sentence stretched into the future as far as the horizon.

Could she put it away? Find the Raff sheâd once loved?

Whoa. What was she thinking?

âItâs wedding nerves,â she told Kleppy and on impulse she carried him into her spare room where her wedding gown hung in all its glory.

Two years of love had gone into making this dress.

She set Kleppy down. The little dog nosed his way around the hem, ducked under the full-circle skirt, poked his nose out again and headed back to her. She smiled and held him and stared at her dress some more.

Sheâd loved making this dress. Loved, loved, loved.

Once upon a time, this was what she was going to do. Sew for a living. Make beautiful things. Make people happy.

Now she was employed getting a low life off the hook. She was going to be Philipâs wife.

But to draw back nowâ¦

The morning stretched on. She sat on the floor of her second bedroom and thought and thought and thought.

Her mother rang close to midday. âYou ready, darling?â

âReady?â

âSweetheart, donât joke,â her mother said sharply. âThis is your afternoon, like Thursday night was Philipâs night. Philipâs mother and I will be by to collect you in half an hour. Donât wear any of your silly dresses now, will you, dear. You know I hate them.â

Her silly dresses.

She meant the ones sheâd made herself. The ones that werenât grey or black or cream.

This was a wedding celebration. Why not wear something silly? Polka dots. Her gorgeous swing skirt with Elvis prints all over?

âIâll drive myself,â she told her mother. âIâll meet you at the golf club.â

âYou wonât be late?â

âWhen am I ever? Oh, and Mum?â

âWhat?â

âIâm bringing my dog.â

There was a momentâs grim silence. Her mother would know what she was talking about. The whole town would know. Sheâd expected her mother to have vented her disapproval by now.

âHasnât Philip talked some sense into you about that yet?â

âAbout that?â

âAbrahamsâ dog. Of all the stupidâ¦â

âIâm keeping him.â

âWell.â Her motherâs breath hissed in and Abby waited for

the eruption. But then suddenly Abby could hear her smile. There was even a tinkling laugh. âThatâs okay,â she said and Abby realised she was on speaker phone, and her mother was also talking to her father. âPhilip will cope with this.â Then, back to herâ¦ âThey donât let dogs in the club house.â

âThey do on the terrace as long as I keep him leashed. Itâs a gorgeous day. Iâm bringing him.â

âThis is between you and Philip, not you and us,â her mother said serenely. âPhilip will talk you into sense, and we can cope with a dog for one afternoon. But donât be late. Isnât this exciting? So many plans, finally come together.â She disconnected.

So many plans, finally come together.

Abby stood and stared at the phone. How could she do the unthinkable?

How could she not?

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âIâm ready.â

Sarah looked beautiful. Hippy beautiful. There was a shop behind the main street catering for little girls who wanted to be fairies or butterflies and adults who wanted to be colourful. It suited Sarah exactly.

The woman who ran it thought Sarah was lovely. She rang Raff whenever a new consignment arrived and heâd wave goodbye to half his weekly salary. It was worth it. Sarahâs joy in her pretty dresses and scarves and her psychedelic boots made upâ¦well, made up in some measure for the rest.

Sheâd woken with another of her appalling headaches. It had finally eased but she was still looking wan, despite her smile. Pretty clothes were the least he could give her.

âCan you drive me to the golf club now? I donât want to be late,â she said, anxious. Sheâd been looking forward to this week for months. Abbyâs pre-wedding parties. Abbyâs wedding itself.

âMy car is at your disposal,â he said and pulled on his policemanâs cap, tipping it like a chauffeur. She smiled.

âTell me again why youâre not coming.â

At least that was easy. âItâs girls only. Iâd look a bit silly in a skirt.â

Sarah giggled, but her smile was fleeting. âIf it wasnât only

girls, would you want to come?â

Sometimes she did this, shooting him serious, insightful questions, right when he didnât need them.

âAbbyâs mother doesnât like me,â he said, deciding to be honest. âIt makes things uncomfortable.â

âBecause of the accident?â

âYes.â

âOh, Raff,â she said and walked over and hugged him. âItâs not fair.â

âThereâs not a lot we can do about it, Sares,â he told her and kissed her and put her away from him. âExcept be happy ourselves. Which we are. How can we help but be happy when youâre wearing a bright pink and yellow and purple and blue skirtâand your purple boots have tassels?â

âDo you like them?â she said, giggling and twirling.

âI love them.â

He was making Sarah happy, he thought as they headed to the golf club to Abbyâs pre-wedding party. At least he could do that.

No one else?

No one else.

Â

Philip was sailing. Heâd gone out with his supermarket-planning mates. Even now he was cruising round Banksia Bay, discussing the pros and cons of investment opportunities.

How did you tell a guy youâd made the biggest mistake of your life when he was out at sea?

How did you go calmly to your pre-wedding party when youâd made a decision like this?

How did you call it offâwhen you hadnât told your fiancÃ© first?

All those wedding gifts, coming her way. Sheâd be expected to unwrap them. Aargh.

But by now the gifts would already be in cars heading towards the golf club. It didnât make any difference if she said, *Donât give them to me today,* or if on Monday she re-wrapped them and sent them all back.

Thatâd be her penance. Sending gifts back.

That and a whole lot else.

She drove towards the golf club slowly. Very slowly. Kleppy lay beside her and even he seemed subdued. She turned into the car park. She sat and stared out through the windscreen, seeing nothing.

Someone tapped on her window. She raised her head and dredged up a smile. Sarah was peering in at her, looking worried.

âWhatâs wrong? You look sad. Do you have another headache? Oh, Abby, and on your party day.â

Raff was right behind his sister. In civvies. Faded jeans and black T-shirt, stretched a bit too tight.

âNo, Iâ¦ I just didnât want to be the first to arrive.â She climbed from the car and sent Raff what she hoped was a bright smile, a smile that said she knew exactly what she was doing.

âCollywobbles?â he asked and it was just what she needed. It was the sort of word that made a woman gird her loins and stiffen her spine and send him a look that was pure defiance.

âWhy on earth would I have collywobbles?â

âIâd have collywobbles if I was marrying Philip.â

âGo jump.â

âPhilipâs really handsome,â Sarah said. âAlmost as handsome as Lionel.â

âLionel?â They said it in unison, distracted. They looked at each other. Looked back at Sarah.

âLionelâs cute,â Sarah said. âSoâs your dress, Abby. I love the Elvises.â

âSo do I,â Abby said, thinking she had one vote at least. She loved this dressâa tiny bustier, a full-circle skirt covered with Elvisesâblack and white print with crimson tulle underneath to make it flare. It was a party dress. A celebration dress.

What was she celebrating?

âAnd youâve made Kleppy a matching bow.â Sarah scooped up the little dog and hugged him. âHeâs adorable. Heâs even more adorable than Lionel.â

âWhoâs Lionel?â Abby asked.

âKleppyâs friend,â Sarah said simply. âOoh, thereâs Margy.â Abbyâs next door neighbour was pulling up on the far side of the car park, a dumpy little woman whose looks belied the fact that

she ran the most efficient disability services organisation in the State. âHi, Margy. Can I sit next to you?â And she dived off, carrying Kleppy, leaving Abby and Raff together.

âLionel?â she said, because that seemed the safest way to go.

âThereâs Lionel who was Isaacâs gardener,â Raff said, frowning. âI didnât realise he and Sarah knew each other, but Sarah gets around more than I think. Okay, have a great henâs party. Iâll pick Sarah up at four.â

âRaff?â

âYes?â He sounded testy.

Sheâd said his name. She needed to add something on the back of it. Something sensible.

But how to say what she needed to say? How to think about saying what she needed to say? How to get over the impossibility of even thinking about thinking aboutâ¦?

Maybe she should stop thinking. Her head was about to fall off.

People were arriving all around them. Her friends. Her motherâs friends. Every woman in this little community whoâd come into contact with her over the years seemed to be getting out of cars, carrying gifts into the golf club.

How many women had her mother invited?

How many gifts would she need to return?

âAbigail?â That was her mother calling. She was standing on the terrace, shielding her eyes from the sun, trying to see who her daughter was talking to. âYour guests are here. You should be receiving them.â

âThere you go,â Raff said and eased himself back into his car. âBy the way, Iâm with Sarah. Thatâs a cute dress. Really cute. You should try wearing that in court some time.â

âRaff?â She didnât want him to go. She didnât wantâ¦

âSee you later,â he said.

He drove away. She stood there in her Elvis dress, staring after him like a dummy.

âAbigail.â Her motherâs voice was sharp. âWhat are you thinking? Youâre being discourteous to our guests. And what on earth are you wearing?â

A cute dress, she thought, as she headed up to her mother, to her waiting guests.

Abigail, what are you thinking?

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What was he thinking?

Nothing. Heâd better not think anything because if he did there was a chasm yawning and it was so big he couldnât see the bottom.

He needed some work. He needed a few kids to do something stupid so he could lay down the law, vent a bit of spleen, feel in control.

Abby in an Elvis dress.

Abby, who was marrying Philip.

Any minute now the steering wheel was going to break.

âRaff?â His radio crackled into life and he grabbed it as if it were a lifeline.

It was Keith. âYeah?â

âThereâs a bit of trouble down on the wharf. Couple of kids chucking craypots into the water, and Joe Paxtonâs threatening to do âem damage. Iâm stuck up on the ridge âcos John Andersonâs locked himself out. Can you deal?â

âAbsolutely,â Raff said, feeling a whole heap better.

Trouble, he could deal with.

Just not how he was feeling about Abby.

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The afternoon was interminable. She smiled and smiled, and thought she should have run. What was she thinking, letting this afternoon go ahead? Just because she needed to tell Philip first.

âYouâll make such a lovely couple. A credit to the town.â That was Mrs Alderson, one of her motherâs bridge partners. âWeâre so looking forward to next Saturday.â

âThank you,â she said and then realised that Mrs Alderson was carrying a rather long shoulder bag and something had peeped from the edge and Kleppy had justâ¦justâ¦

He was heading under the table, to the full length of his lead, looking satisfied.

She stooped to retrieve it. It was a romance novel, a brand she recognised. A reallyâ¦ Goodness, what was that on the front? She snatched it from her dog and handed it back, apologising.

Margot Alderson turned beet-red and stuffed it back into her

bag.

âI donât know what youâre doing with that dog,â she snapped. âHeâs trouble. If you must get yourself a dog, get a nice one. I have a friend who breeds pekes.â

Kleppy looked up at her from under the table and wagged his tail. Heâd done what he wanted. Heâd had his snatch and heâd given it to his mistress.

âI kinda like Kleppy,â Abby said. âAnd you knowâ¦I donât even mind a bit of trouble.â

Her motherâs friend departed, still indignant. Abby stared after her, thinkingâof all thingsâabout the cover of the romance novel. The cover showed a truly fabulous hero, bare from the waist up.

I donât mind pecs, either, she added silently. *Or a bit of hot romance.*

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He had two kids in the cells waiting for their parents to come and collect them. âTake your time,â heâd told them. âItâll do âem good to sweat.

Which meant he was stuck at the station, babysitting two drunken adolescents. Forced to do nothing but think.

Abby.

A man could go quietly nuts.

It wasnât fair to interfere more than he already had.

He wasnât feeling fair.

âIf I was a Neanderthal Iâd go find me a club and a cave,â he muttered.

He wasnât. He was Banksia Bayâs cop and Abby was a modern non-Neanderthal woman who knew her own mind. He had to respect it.

âI miss the old days,â he said morosely. âItâd be so much easier to go set up a cave.â

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It was over. The last gift was in her fatherâs van, being taken home to their spare room, Abbyâs old bedroom, pink, pretty.

âI wish youâd come home for your last week,â her mother said, hugging her. âItâs where you belong.â

Abby said no, as she always said no. They left, leaving Abby

sitting on the terrace with Kleppy.

Philip was coming by to meet her. She had to tell him.

Her motherâs wordsâ¦ *Itâs where you belong.*

Where did she belong?

She didnât know.

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âWhat do you mean you donât want to get married?â

To say Philip was gobsmacked would be an understatement. He was staring at her as if sheâd lost her mind.

Maybe she had.

âI canât,â she muttered, miserable. Sheâd tried to get him to go for a walk with her, to get away from the people in the bar. He wouldnât. They were out on the terrace but they were still in full view.

Philip was tired from sailing. He didnât want a walk. He wanted to go home, have a shower, take a nap, then take his fiancÃ©e out to Banksia Bayâs newest restaurant. That was what heâd planned.

He hadnât planned on Abby being difficult.

He hadnât planned on a broken engagement.

âItâs justâ¦ Kleppy,â she said in a small voice and Philip stared at her as if she were demented.

âThe dog.â

âHeâs made meâ¦â

âWhat?â

What, indeed? She hardly understood it herself. How one dog could wake her from a ten-year fog. âYou donât like him,â she said.

âOf course I donât like him,â Philip snapped. âHeâs a mutt. But Iâm prepared to put up with him.â

âI donât want you to put up with him.â She took a deep breath. Tried to say what she scarcely understood herself. The thing in the middle of the fog. âI donât want you to put up with me.â

âWhat are you saying?â

âYou donât like me, Philip.â

He looked at her as if sheâd lost her mind. âOf course I like you. I love you. Havenât I shown you that, over and over? This is

craziness. Pre-wedding nerves. To sayâ¦â

âYou donât like this dress, do you?â

He stared down at the Elvises and he couldnât quite repress a wince. âNo, butâ¦â

âAnd you painted your living roomâ¦our living room when I move inâ¦beige. I donât like beige.â

âThen weâll paint it something else. I can cope.â

âSee, thatâs exactly what I mean. Youâll put up with something else. Like you put up with me.â

âThis is nonsense.â

They were sitting at the table right on the edge of the terrace, with a view running all the way down the valley to the coast below. It was the most beautiful view in the world. If anyone looked out from the bar right now theyâd see a man and a woman having a tÃªte Ã tÃªte, she flashing a diamond almost as wide as her finger, he taking her hand in his. Visibly calming down.

âMum said this was bound to happen,â Philip said. âShe felt like this when she married my father. A week before the wedding. Pre-wedding jitters.â

Philipâs mother. A mouse, totally dominated by Philipâs fatherâand by Philip himself.

Sheâd seen Philipâs mother looking at her dress today. Not brave enough to say she liked it. But justâ¦looking.

âI donât want to be beige,â she whispered.

âYou wonât be beige. Youâll be very happy. Thereâs nothing you want that I canât give you.â

âI want you to like my dog.â She felt as if she was backed into a corner, trying to find reasons for the unreasonable. Trying to explain the unexplainable.

âIâll try and like your dog.â

âBut why?â she said. âThere are women out there who like beige. There are women out there who donât like mutts. Why do you want to marry me?â

âI was always going to marry you.â

âThatâs just it,â she said and it was practically a wail. âWeâve just drifted into this.â

âWe did not drift. I made a decision ten years agoâ¦â

âYou wanted to marry me ten years ago?â

âOf course I did.â He sighed, exasperated. âItâs okay. I understand. One week of pre-wedding nerves isnât going to mess with ten years of plans.â

âPhilip, I donât want to,â she said and, before she could think about being sensible, she hauled the diamond from her finger and laid it on the table in front of him. âI canât. I knowâ¦I know itâs sensible to marry you. Youâre a good man. I know youâve been unfailingly good to me. I know youâll even put up with my dog and paint your living room sunbeam-yellow if I really want. But, you know what? I want someone who likes sunbeam-yellow.â

âWhat theâ¦? Is there someone else?â

Someone else. At the thought of who that someone else wasâ¦at the sheer impossibility of saying his name, voicing the thought, her courage failed her. Her courage to say *Raff*.

But not her courage to do what she must, right now.

âI canât,â she said quietly. âNo matter what. This isnât about someone else, Philip. Itâs about what Iâm feeling. Finding Kleppyâ¦ Yeah, itâs crazy, but he makes me laugh. Heâs a little bit nuts and I love it. I wish you loved it. You donât, and itâs made me see that I donât want to be Mrs Philip Dexter. Youâve been wonderful to me, Philip. You deserve a woman who thinks youâre wonderful in return. You deserve a woman whoâll love the life you want to live instead of putting up with it, and you deserve a woman who youâll think is wonderful instead of putting up with her.â

âAbbyâ¦â He was truly shocked now, ashen, and she felt dreadful. Appalling.

She had to do this.

She pushed the diamond closer to him, so close it nearly fell off the edge of the table.

Philip was a sensible man. This diamond was worth a fortune. He didnât let it fall. He took it, looked down at it for a long moment and then carefully zipped it into the pocket of his sailing anorak.

He rose.

âIâm damp in these clothes,â he said, pale and angry. âI need to get changed. And youâ¦ You need to think about what youâre throwing away. Youâre being foolish beyond belief. Insulting, even. I know itâs pre-wedding nerves and Iâll make allowances.

Think about it overnight. Iâll come and see you in the morning when youâve had time to reconsider.â

âI wonât reconsider.â

âYou have twenty-four hours to see sense,â he snapped. âAfter all Iâve done for youâ¦ I canât believe youâd be so ungrateful. To walk away from meâ¦ Of all the crazyâ¦ Why donât you just get on a slow boat to China and be done with it?â

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A slow boat to China? Right now, the concept had enormous merit, but she wasnât going anywhere.

She couldnât move. She sat and stared sightlessly over the golf course and she thoughtâ¦nothing.

Someone came and cleared her glass. Asked if sheâd like another drink. Asked if she and Philip were going to China for their honeymoon.

Finally let her be.

Theyâd be muttering in the bar. Wondering what she was doing, just sitting.

Expecting Philip to come back?

Maybe theyâd seen his anger, his tight lips, his rigid stance as heâd stalked to his car.

Maybe the town already knew.

She wouldnât tell anyone. She couldnât. Philip had given her twenty-four hours to come to her senses. She owed it to him to wait, to make him see it was a measured, sensible decision.

Is there someone else?

She thought of Philipâs demand. Was there?

Raff had kissed her. Twice. Heâd made her feelâ¦

She couldnât afford to acknowledge how he made her feel.

âKlep!â The call jolted her out of her misery, an unfamiliar voice filled with joy. It was one of the golf course groundsmen, striding up from the first tee. She looked closer and recognised him.

Lionel. Isaacâs gardener. A big, burly man in his mid-thirties. Slow and sleepy and quiet.

He reached her and knelt on the terrace and Kleppy was licking his face with joy. âKlep!â

âLionel,â she said, hauling herself out of her introspection. âWhat are you doing here?â

âWorking,â he said, briefly extricating himself from Kleppyâs licking. âGotta job mowing. Not as good as Mr Abrahamsâ. Sâokay.â

âYou and Kleppy are friends?â

âYeah.â

Oh, help. She looked at the two of them and thoughtâ¦and thoughtâ¦

Thought they were greeting each other with a joy born of love.

âDid you want him?â It nearly killed her to say it. To lose Kleppy and Philip in the one afternoonâ¦

She knew what would hurt most.

Butâ¦ âCanât,â Lionel said briefly. âI live in a rooming house now. I had to sell the house when Baxter pinched Mumâs money. Lost the house, then lost me job when Mr Abrahams died. Someone said the Finns had Klep. Went up there to see and Sarah said he were yours. Sarah said he were happy. Youâre looking after âim?â

âIâ¦yes.â

âHeâs a great dog, Klep,â Lionel said. âMakes a man happy.â

âIâ¦ Heâll make me happy.â

âGoodo,â Lionel said. âThat manâ¦ Dexterâ¦ They said youâre getting married.â

âIâ¦â

âHeâs the lawyer.â It wasnât a question.

âYes.â

âHe donât like dogs,â Lionel said. âHe come up to Mr Abrahamsâ when he made a will. Kleppy jumped up and it were like he was touching dirt. You and heâ¦â He stopped, the question unasked. *You and heâ¦*

âWeâll sort it out,â Abby said. âI love Kleppy enough for both of us.â

âThatâs good,â Lionel said. âYouâve made me feel better. And youâre a lucky woman. Kleppyâs the best mate you could have.â He gave Kleppy a farewell hug and went back to mowing.

Abby kept on staring at nothing.

Like he was touching dirtâ¦

Sheâd done the right thing. She didnât need twenty-four

hours. *She was a lucky woman?*

Maybe she was. She had Kleppy and she wasâ¦*free?*

CHAPTER TEN

ABBY told no one but it was all over town by morning.

Abigail Callahan and Philip Dexter had had a row. Sheâd flung his ring back in his face. Heâd accused her of having an affair. Sheâd accused him of having an affair. The wedding would cost squillions to cancel. Abby was threatening to go to China.

Abby was threatening to take the dog to China.

Why, oh, why, did she live in a small town?

The phone rang at seven-thirty and it was her mother. Hysterical.

âSam Bolte said he saw you at the golf club and you werenât wearing your ring. Iâve just had a call from Ingrid. Ingrid says Sam says Philip was rigid with anger, and he said itâs all about that stupid dog. Are you out of your mind?â

She laid back on the pillows and listened to her motherâs hysteria and thought about it.

Was she out of her mind?

Kleppy was asleep on her feet.

She could sleep with Kleppy for ever. If she didnât do something about Raff.

She couldnât do something about Raff. There was nothing to do.

âItâs okay, Mum, Iâll sort it,â she said.

âSort it? Tell Philip itâs all a ghastly mistake? You know, if it means the difference between whether you marry or not, your father and I will even keep the creature.â

The creature nuzzled her left foot and she scratched his ear with her toe.

âThatâs really generous, butâ¦â

âYou canât cancel the wedding. Itâll costâ¦â

âNo, it wonât.â This, at least, she could do. Sheâd figured it out, looked at the contract with the golf club, had it nailed. âI

lose my deposit, which is tiny. None of the foodâs been ordered. Nothingâs final. I can do this.â

âYouâre never serious?â

âMum, I donât want to marry Philip.â

There was a long, long silence. Thenâ¦ âWhy not?â It was practically a wail.

âBecause I donât want to be sensible. I like being a dog owner. I like that my dogâs a thief.â She thought about it and decided, why not go for broke; her mother could hardly be any more upset than she was now. âI might as well tell youâ¦ I donât think I want to be a lawyer, either.â

âYouâve lost your mind,â her mother moaned. âJohn, come and tell your daughter sheâs lost her mind. Darling, weâll take you to the doctor. Dr Patersonâs known you since you were little. He can give you something.â

âIâm not sure he can give me what I want.â

âWhat do you want?â

âMy dog, for now,â she said, shoving another thought firmly away. âMy independence. My life.â

âAbigailâ¦â

âIâm hanging up now, Mum,â she said. âI love you very much, but Iâm not marrying Philip and Iâm not mad. Or I donât think Iâm mad. Iâm not actually sure who I am any more, but I think I need to find out, and I canât do that as Mrs Philip Dexter.â

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âRumour is sheâs thrown him over. Rumour is she met some guy at that conference she went to in Sydney last month. Chinese. Millionaire. Loaded. Couple of kids by a past marriage but thatâs not worrying her. Rumour is she wants to take the dogâ¦â

Raff spent the morning feelingâ¦

Surprised?

Â

âGo away. Iâm not home.â

She was pretending not to be home. The first couple of times the doorbell rang Kleppy barked, which might be a giveaway, but she fixed that. She tucked him firmly under the duvet, and

she put her jewellery box down there with him. Which reminded herâ¦

Should she give the box back to Philipâs grandfather? Heâd given it to her as a labour of love, on the premise she was marrying his grandson.

Maybe he was one of those out there ringing her doorbell, sent by her mother to tell her to be sensible.

It couldnât matter. Go away, go away, go away.

How long could she stay under the duvet? She started working out how much food she had in the place; when sheâd be forced to do a grocery run. She thought of the impossibility of facing shopping in Banksia Bay. Maybe she and Kleppy could leave town for a bit.

Where could she go?

Somewhere Raff could find her. If he wanted to find her.

Donât think of that. Donât think of Raff. Get this awfulness out of the way, and then look forward. Pleaseâ¦

The doorbell rang again.

Go away.

It rang again, more insistent, and it was followed by a knock, too loud to be her mother. Philip? Go away!

âAbigail Callahan?â The voice was stern with authority and it made her jump. Raff.

Raff was right outside her front door.

Panic.

What did he think he was doing, hiking up to her front door as bold as brass? She peeked past the curtains and his patrol car was parked out front. With its lights flashing.

She practically moaned. This was all she needed. Who knew what the town was saying about her, but she did not need Raff in the mix. It was all too complicated.

Kleppy whined, sensing her confusion, and she hugged him and held her breath and willed Raff to go away.

But Raff Finn wasnât a man to calmly turn away.

âAbigail Callahan, I know youâre in there. Answer the door, please, or Iâll be forced to come back with a warrant.â

A warrant? What theâ¦?

âGo away.â She yelled it to the front door and there was a momentâs silence. And then a response, deep and serious, and

only someone who knew him well could hear the laughter behind it.

âMiss Callahan, Iâm here to inform you that your dog is suspected of petty larceny. I have information that stolen property may be being stored on your premises. Open the door now, please, or Iâll be forced to take further action.â

Her dogâ¦

Petty larcenyâ¦

She lifted the duvet and stared at Kleppy. Who gazed back, innocent as you please. What theâ¦? He hadnât been out. How could he have stolen anything?

Sheâd given back her motherâs friendâs romance novel. Kleppy was clean.

âHe hasnât done anything,â she yelled, and then had to try again because the first yell came out more like a squeak. âGo find some other dog to pin it to. Kleppyâs innocent.â

âThere speaks a defence lawyer. Sorry, maâam, but the evidence points to Kleppy.â

âWhat evidence?â

âMrs Fryerâs diamantÃ© glasses case, given to her by her late husband. Itâs said to be worth a fortune, plus it has sentimental value. Itâs alleged it was stolen from her bag, which was parked underneath the table you were sitting at yesterday. I have reason to believe your dog was tied under that very table. Circumstantial, Iâll grant you, but evidence enough for a warrant.â

Uh-oh.

She thought about it. Kleppy lying innocently at her feet through yesterdayâs lunch. A big table, twelve or so women. Twelve or so handbags at their respective ownersâ feet.

Uh-oh, uh-oh, uh-oh.

âI have more serious things to think about this morning than glasses cases,â she managed and she heard the laughter intensify.

âYouâre saying thereâs something more serious than grand theft?â

âI thought it was petty larceny.â

âThat depends whether the diamantÃ©s are real. Mrs Fryer swears they are. I knew old Jack Fryer and Iâm thinking otherwise but I need to give the lady the benefit of the doubt.â

âHe hasnât got them,â she wailed. âHeâd have given them to me by now.â

âI need to search.â

âGo away.â

âLet me in, Abigail,â he said, stern again. âThe neighbours are looking.â

Oh, for heavenâs sake. Raff walking in hereâ¦ If anyone in this town got even the vaguest sniff of what she was feelingâ¦of why sheâd been jerked out of her miserable life into something resembling a futureâ¦

Her future.

The word somehow steadied her. She wasnât marrying Philip. She had a future. Okay, maybe she needed to step into it rather than hiding under the duvet.

She climbed out of bed and shrugged on her brand new honeymoon wrap. Where was her shabby pink chenille? Sheâd got rid of it. Of course she had. That was what a girl did when she was getting married.

So now she was stuck with pure silk. Pure silk and Raff. She shoved her toes into elegant white slippers, pasted a glower on her face and stomped through to the front door. Hauled it open.

Raff was there in his cop uniform. He lookedâ¦he lookedâ¦

Maybe how *he* looked wasnât the issue. âWhoa,â he said, his gaze raking her from the toes up, and she felt herself start to burn. Sheâd had fun buying herself wedding lingerie. Sheâd never owned silk before. It was making her body feelâ¦

Well, something was making her body feelâas if it had been a really bad idea to give all her shabby stuff to the welfare store. The way Raff was lookingâ¦

Stop it. She practically stamped her foot. Raff was a cop. He was here to search the place. What she was thinking?

She knew what she was thinking, and sheâd better stop thinking it right now. Instead, she concentrated on keeping her glower at high beam and stood aside as he came in.

âI donât want you here.â What a lie.

âNeeds must. You say you donât have a glasses case, maâam? â

âIf you say *maâam* once more I may be up for copicide.â

âCopicide?â

âWhatever. Justifiable homicide. Kleppy didnât pinch anything.â

âAre you sure?â

She winced at that. âUmâ¦ No.â

He grinned. âNot such a good defence lawyer, then. So whatâs with the millionaire?â

âThe millionaire?â

âThe guy youâve thrown Philip over for.â

The millionaire. If he only knew. âI hate this town,â she muttered, and she didnât need to try and glower.

âSo itâs all a lie.â

âWhatâs a lie?â

âThat youâve tossed Philip aside and found another.â

âYes. No. I meanâ¦â

He caught her hand and held it up for them both to see. Sheâd been wearing Philipâs ring for two years now. A stark white band showed where the ring had been.

âProof?â Raff said softly.

âIf I ran off with someone else I wouldnât be here now,â she snapped. âAnd if he was a millionaire Iâd have a rock to match.â

âBut youâve given Philip the flick.â

âPhilip and I are taking time to reassess our positions.â

He surveyed her thoughtfully, once more taking in the silk. âThatâs lawyer speak for a ripper of a fight and no oneâs speaking. Does this mean Sarah and I get our pasta maker back?â

That was a punch below the belt. But stillâ¦ The pasta maker and Philip, or no pasta maker and no Philip.

No choice.

How had she changed so much? This time last week sheâd been the perfect bride. Now, here she was, standing in the hall with her criminal dog behind her, with Raff right here. Right in her hall. Big, sexy, smiling.

Raff.

âIâll check my bag,â she muttered but he put her aside quite gently.

âNo, maâam. Iâll check your bag. I donât want evidence tampered with.â

âYouâre thinking of taking paw prints?â

He chuckled, a lovely rich sound that filled the hall; that

made her feelâ¦like there might be something on the far side of this awfulness.

Her bag was by the front door where sheâd tossed it when sheâd come in yesterday. Big, bright, covered with Elvises. Sheâd made it as a picnic bag, thinking wistfully her Elvis dress would look cute on picnics. As if Mrs Philip Dexter would ever go on picnics.

Now the bag was stuffed with legally gathered lootâall the small gifts sheâd been given yesterday. These were the gifts sheâd have to sort and send back, with a note saying very sorry, she wasnât marrying Philip.

Sheâd have to reword that. She wasnât sorry at all. Especially now Raff was here.

He squatted beside the bag and started laying gifts out on the floor.

âCandle holdersâvery tasteful. Place matsâa girl canât have too many place mats. Whatâs with the Scent-O-Pine Air Freshener? Oh, thatâs from Mrs Fryer. She really doesnât like your Kleppy. Hey, His and Her key ringsâvery useful. Oh, and whatâs this?â

This was a glasses case. Exceedingly tasteful. Pink and purple, studded with huge diamantÃ©s.

âWorth a billion,â Raff said appreciatively. âEvery diamond over a carat, but not a one out of place. Lovely soft mouth, our villain.â

The villain had come to investigate, pushing his way through the crack in the bedroom door, nosing his way to the crime scene. Checking out the glasses case. Putting his paw on it, then looking back to Abby and wagging his tail.

âDonât say a thing, Klep,â Abby said. âNo admissions.â

âHis DNAâs all over it.â

âHe put it on just now. Heâs as horrified as I am. And youâ¦ youâve let the suspect himself contaminate the crime scene. Iâm appalled.â

He grinned and rubbed Kleppy under the ear and Kleppy wriggled his tail, lifted the glasses case delicately from his hand and headed back into the bedroom. Straight under the duvet with the rest of his loot.

Raff looked through to the bedroom, thoughtful. âMaybe I

should search in there, too.â

âDonât you dare,â she said, suddenly panicking, and he straightened and his smile faded.

âI wonât. You okay?â

âIâll live.â

âYou have a hard few days ahead. I hope your millionaireâs going to take care of you.â

âRaffâ¦â

âMmm?â He was watching her. Justâ¦watching. The laughter had gone now. He was intense and caring and big and male andâ¦andâ¦

âI think I can put Ben behind me,â she said and his face stilled.

âSorry?â

âIâ¦â

How to say the unsayable? How to get it out? Sheâd never intendedâ¦ In a few months, maybe, when the dust had settledâ¦ But now? Here?

âI think I might love you,â she whispered and the thought was out thereâhuge, filling the house with its danger.

Danger? That was what it felt like, she thought. A sword, hanging over her head, threatening to fall.

Falling in love with the bad boy.

âI knowâ¦this is dumb.â She was stammering, stupid with confusion. âItâs not the time to say it. I shouldnâtâ¦ I mean, I donât know whether you want it. Iâm not sure even that I want it, but I fell in love with you twenty years ago, Raff Finn, and I canât stop. This weekâ¦itâs jolted me out of everything. Itâs made me seeâ¦ Your craziness broke my heart but it hasnât changed anything. I canâtâ¦ I canât stop loving you. If I can forgive what happened with Ben, is there a chance for us?â

âFor us?â His face was emotionless. Still. Wary?

âOnce upon a time we were boyfriend and girlfriend.â She hadnât got this right. She knew it but she didnât know how to get it right. âI was hopingâ¦â

âWe might get together again?â

âYes.â

âNow youâve forgiven me.â

âIâ¦yes. Butâ¦â

âThereâs no chance at all,â he said and suddenly there was no trace of laughter, no trace of gentleness, nothing at all. His voice was rough and cold and harsh. He looked stunnedâand, unbelievably, he looked as if sheâd just struck him. â*If I can forgive what happened to Benâ¦* What sort of statement is that?â

âItâs what I need to do.â

âWhat do you mean?â he demanded.

âIf Iâm to love you. I need to forgive you if Iâm to love you. All Iâm saying is that I can. All Iâm saying is that I think I have.â

Silence. Silence, silence and more silence.

She couldnât bear it. She wanted to dive back under the duvet and hide. Hide from the look on Raffâs face.

But there was no escaping that look. There was such painâ¦

âThereâs no such thing as forgiveness for Ben,â he said at last, and the harshness was gone. It had been replaced with an emptiness that was even more dreadful. âIf you have to say itâ¦ Itâs still there.â

âOf course itâs still there.â

âOf course,â he repeated. âHow can it not? And it always will be.â He took a deep breath. Another.

The silence was killing her.

She had this wrong. She didnât know how. She didnât know what she could do to repair it.

Would it ever be possible to repair it?

âAbby, ten years ago, I was crazily, criminally stupid,â he said at last, speaking slowly, emphasising each word as if it were being dragged out of him. âI canât think about it without hating myself. But you know what? Iâve moved on.â

âYouâveâ¦â

âIf I hadnât, then Iâd go insane,â he said. âHow do you think I felt? My best friend dead, my sister irreparably injured, and me with no memory of it at all. I was gutted by Benâs deathâI still am. To lose such a friendâ¦ To inflict such pain on everyone who loved himâ¦ And more, every time I look at Sarah I know what Iâve done. But after ten yearsâ¦â

Another deep breath. Another silence.

âAfter ten years, I have it in perspective,â he said. âIâve seen a lot of stupid kids. A lot of appalling accidents. Thereâs always a driver; itâs always someoneâs fault. But in those situations, you

know what? There are other things, too. Kids egging other kids on. Being dumb themselves. That night Ben wasnât wearing a seat belt. We had âem fittedâmy gran insisted on it. Sarah wasnât wearing a seat belt, eitherâshe was wearing a cute new dress she knew would crush. None of us should have been up there on that track in the rain. It was totally dumb. Yes, I was driving. Yes, I must have veered to the wrong side of the road and Philip says I was speeding. Iâve taken that on board. Iâve convicted myself and Iâve received my sentence. Iâve lost Ben as youâve lost Ben. Iâve lost parts of Sarah, and my actions hurt so many, had so many repercussions, they can never be repaired. Thatâs what I live with, Abby, every day of my life, and Iâm not adding to it.â

âI donâtâ¦I donât know what you mean.â

âIf we took this furtherâ¦ Waking up every morning beside a woman who says she forgives me? What sort of sentence it that? This weekâ¦okay, Iâve kissed you and yes, Iâve wanted you. Iâve given you a hard time about marrying Philip. And you know what? Last night, when the whispers went round that youâd given back his ring, for one breathtaking moment I thought maybe we could figure out some sort of future. But nowâ¦ You forgive me? Graciously? Lovingly? Thanks, but no thanks. I canât live with that, Abby. You do what you need to do, but donât factor me in. Fetch Mrs Fryerâs glasses case, please. I need to go.â

âRaffâ¦â

âDonât push this any further,â he snapped. âFigure it out for yourself. Itâs your life. Iâve done what I need to survive and forgiveness doesnât come into it. Acceptanceâ¦thatâs a much harder call.â

She stared up at him, confused. Shattered. Knowing, thoughâ¦knowing in the back of her mind that he was right.

She forgave him?

Where was a future in that?

Â

Raff returned the glasses case to Mrs Fryer, who took it with suspicion and examined it from all angles for damage. She glared at him and he thought that if it had been his dog that had taken the case, heâd be up on charges by now. Even though the case was worth zip.

Diamonds? Heâd seen a diamond that big and he knew what a real one looked like. That diamond was sitting in Philipâs security safe by now, he thought. That it wasnât sitting on Abbyâs fingerâ¦

He couldnât afford to go there.

âDid you see her?â Mrs Fryer hissed.

âSee who, maâam?â

âAbigail.â

âI did. Sheâs extremely apologetic. I believe she may come round later and apologise in person.â

âWas there anyone with her?â

âHer dog,â Raff said neutrally and Mrs Fryer sighed in exasperation.

âNo, dummy. I mean a man. Is there anyone else?â

âI believe the crime was the dogâs own work,â Raff said, and turned and left before Mrs Fryer could slap him.

Anyone elseâ¦

No. Only him. Sheâd tossed Philipâs ring back at him because she lovedâ¦*him?*

I think I might love you.

The words echoed over and over in his head. Where did a man go with that?

Without thinking, he found himself driving past his little farm, further up the mountain, up near Isaacâs place, to the road where one night ten years ago his world had been blasted to bits.

How long did a man suffer for one momentâs stupidity?

Heâd stopped suffering. Almost. Heâd almost found peace. Until Abby had saidâ¦

I think I might love you.

He couldnât afford to let her words rip him apart. He had his life to get on with and she had hers.

It might be a good idea if she did go to China.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ON SUNDAY afternoon Abby decided that she did need to speak to Philip. It was only fair. What followed was a very stilted phone call. Philip sounded appalled and angry and confused. She crept back under her duvet and hugged Kleppy and decided she didnât need milk or bread; she could live on baked beans for a while.

The whole town was judging her.

On Monday she decided she couldnât hide under her duvet for ever. She had to pull herself together. She was not a whimpering mess. She was not hiding a millionaire under her bed. She needed to get on with her life.

That meant getting out of bed, dressing as she always dressed, smart and corporate for the last time. Today sheâd wind up this court case with Philip and then sheâd resign. Sheâd talk reasonably to her parents. Sheâd start sending gifts back and then figure, slowly and sensibly, where she wanted to take her life from here.

She did need to be sensible. She no longer wanted to be a lawyer, but that didnât mean stranding Philip or stranding her clients without reasonable notice. That was the sort of thing an hysterical ex-bride would doâthe sort of woman whoâd throw Philip over for some crazy, unreasonable love.

She wasnât that woman. Sheâd ended an unsuitable engagement for totally sensible reasons and she was totally in control. She entered court with her head held high. She sat in court and concentrated on lookingâ¦normal.

She was aware that the courthouse held more people than it had on Friday. Thatâd be because people were looking at her. The woman who ditched Philip Dexter.

No matter. She was in control. Kleppy was safely locked up. She looked neat and respectable, and her court notes were beautifully filed in her lovely Italian briefcase in the order they

were needed.

As the morning stretched on, she decided she hated her briefcase. Sheâd give it back to Philip, she thought. That was sensible. He might find a use for a matching pair.

Back home, her wedding dress was packed in tissue, waiting for someone to make another sensible decision.

What to do with two thousand beads?

Decisions, decisions, decisions.

She concentrated on taking notes for Philip, handing him the papers he needed, keeping on her sensible faceâbut it was really hard, and when Raff entered the courtroom she thought her face might crack. Quite soon.

Philip had called Raff back on a point of law. Just clarifying the prosecution case. Just decimating the case Raff had put together with such care.

Raff wasnât a lawyer and he had no help. The Crown Prosecutor was hopeless. She wanted to cross the room and shake him, but Malcolm was eighty and he looked like if she shook him his teeth would fall out or heâd die of a coronary.

Wallace Baxter would get off. She could hear it in Philipâs voice.

Philip might not have had a very good weekendâyes, his fiancÃ©e had jilted himâbut there was nothing of the destroyed lover in his bearing. As the morning wore on he started sounding smug.

He was winning.

He sat down beside her after pulling the last of Raffâs evidence apart and he gave her a conspiratorial smile.

He didnât mind, she thought incredulously. He didnât mind that sheâd thrown back his ringâor not so much that it stopped him enjoying winning.

Her sensible face was slipping.

âThis is brilliant,â Wallace hissed beside her. âPhilipâs great. The stuff heâs done to get me offâ¦ But whatâs this I hear about your engagement being off? Youâd be a fool to walk away from a guy this great.â

A guy this great. Wallace was beaming.

She felt sick.

She stared around to the back of the court where Bert and

Gwen Mackervale looked close to tears. Because of Wallace Baxterâs deception theyâd had to sell their house. They were living in their daughterâs spare bedroom.

She thought of Lionel, a lovely, gentle man whoâd live in a rooming house for ever. Because of Wallace.

And because of Philipâs skill in defending him.

She looked at Wallace and Philip and the smile between them was almost conspiratorial. The vague suspicions sheâd been having about this case cemented into a tight knot of certainty. *The stuff heâs done to get me offâ¦*

She was lawyer for the defence. Sensible defence lawyers did not question their own cases.

Sheâd stopped being sensible on Saturday afternoon. Or she thought she had. Maybe there was more *sensible* she had to discard.

She looked at Wallaceâa guy whoâd systematically cheated for all his life. She looked at Philip, smug and sure.

She looked at Raff, whoâd lost control of a car one dark night when he was nineteen years old.

Forgive?

âItâs nailed,â Philip said. âLetâs see Finn get out of this.â

Finn get out of this? Wallace, surely.

But she looked at Philip and she knew he hadnât made a mistake. Morality didnât come into it. Raff was on the other side, therefore Raff had to be defeated.

How could she ever have thought she could marry Philip? How could her life have ended up here?

Her head was spinning. Define sensible? Sitting in a Banksia Bay courtroom defending Wallace Baxter?

Wallace and Philipâ¦smug. Winning.

Wallace and Philipâ¦ *The stuff heâs done to get me offâ¦*

Her thoughts were racing, suspicions surfacing everywhere. She didnât know for sure, but in Philipâs briefcaseâ¦ The briefcase that matched hersâ¦

What was she thinking?

Raff was leaving now, his evidence finished. She could see by the set of his shoulders that he knew exactly what would happen.

Heâd done his best for the townâfor a town that judged him.

Wallace was smiling. Philip was smiling. There were only a

couple of minor defence witnesses to go and then summing up. Unlessâ¦unlessâ¦

She couldnât bear it.

Philip. Smiling. The model citizen.

Raff. Grim and stoic. The bad boy.

She was a mess of conflicting emotion. She was trying to get things clear but it was like wading into custard. All she knew was that she couldnât stay here a moment longer.

âExcuse me,â she said to the men beside her. âI need to go.â

âWhere?â Philip said, astounded.

âTo check on Kleppy. He gets into trouble alone.â

âYou canât walk outâto check on a dog.â

âNo,â she said. âNot just to check a dog. Much, much more.â

She rose and the eyes of the court were on her. Too bad. She wasnât sure what she was doing, but there was no way in the world she could sit here any longer.

âBye,â she said, to the courtroom in general.

âDonât be stupid,â Philip snapped, and she looked at him for a long moment and then she shook her head.

âI wonât. Not any more. Bye, Philip.â

She lifted up the glossy Italian briefcase from under the desk, swiftly checking she had the right discreet initials, and she strode out of the court. Her pert black shoes clicked on the floor as she walked, and she didnât look back once.

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Raff paused in the entrance, to take a few deep breaths, to think there was no one to punch.

Heâd wanted to punch Dexter for maybe ten years. He couldnât. Good cops didnât punch defence lawyers. Dexter was just doing his job.

Another deep breath.

âRaff.â

He turned and Abby was closing the courtroom door. Leaning against it. Closing her eyes.

âHey,â he said and she opened her eyes and met his gaze. Full on.

âHey.â She sounded like someone just waking up.

âYou taking a break?â

âI need to go home and check Kleppy.â

âFair enough.â He hesitated. Thought about offering her a ride. Thought that might be a bad idea.

Her sports car was close, in the place marked *Abigail Callahan, Solicitor.* Her spot was closer than the one marked *Police.* It wasnât as close as Dexterâs though. Dexter and the Judge had parking spaces side by side.

Dexterâs Porsche was the most expensive car in the car park.

Get through the other side of anger, he told himself harshly. Was there another side?

Abby had passed him now, walking into the sunlight to her car. She raised her briefcase to lay it in the passenger seat. Hesitated.

She lowered her briefcase. Fiddled with the catch.

Raised it again. Tipped.

Papers went everywhere, a sprawl of legal paperwork fluttering in the sunlight. And tapes. A score of tiny audio cassettes.

âWhoops,â she said as tapes went flying.

The Abigail Callahan heâd known for the last ten years would never say *whoops.*

But she didnât look fussed. She didnât move. She didnât begin to pick anything up.

He didnât move either. He wasnât sure what was going on.

âYou know, these should probably be picked up,â she said. âThey might be important.â Might they?

âIâm sorry to trouble you, but I seem to have taken the wrong briefcase,â she said, sounding carefully neutral. âBut Iâm in such a hurryâ¦ Would you mind putting the stuff back in and returning it to Philip?â

What theâ¦?

âThereâs no rush,â she continued. âPhilip has his notes on the desk so he wonât miss these for a while. Maybe you could go back to the station to sort them into order before you give them back. Iâm sure Philip would think that was a kindness.â

She sighed then, looking at the mess of tapes and paperwork. âThis is what comes of having matching briefcases,â she said. âTheyâre so easy to mix up. I told Philip it was a bad ideaâI did want a blue one. But at least I do know this is Philipâsâbecause of the tapes. Philip always records his client appointments. Heâs

a stickler for recordingâ¦everything. He always has. My briefcase holds files for submission to court. Philipâs files and tapes are always in much more detail.â

They stood staring at each other in the sunlight. Abbyâ¦

âThe tapes, Raff,â she said gently, and she gave him a wide, impudent smile. It was a smile he hadnât seen for years. It made him feelâ¦ It made him feelâ¦

As if Abby was back.

âYouâll take care of them?â she asked.

âIâ¦yes.â What else was a man to say?

âHave fun, then,â she said and she climbed into her car. âIâm sure you will.â

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He collected the tapes with speedâsomething told him it might be important to have them collected and be gone before Dexter realised the mix-up.

He thought about Abby.

He headed back to the station thinking about Abby.

Life was gettingâ¦interesting.

Have fun?

He should be thinking about tapes.

He was, but he was also thinking about Abby.

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She went home, but only briefly. She changed into jeans, collected Kleppy and headed up the mountain.

She had some hard thinking to do, and it seemed the mountain was the place to do it. For a little bit she thought about Philipâs briefcase but by the time she reached the mountain sheâd forgotten all about Philip. Sheâd moved on.

She parked out the front of Isaacâs placeâthe safest place to park. Kleppy whined against the fence and she cuddled him and thoughtâ¦

Ben was here.

That was why sheâd come. Ben had died up here, in the thick bushland on the mountain, a place that had magically been spared logging, where the gums were vast and the scenery was breathtaking. After all these years, suddenly it felt right that she

was here with him. Her brother.

For the last ten years Ben had been lost, and sheâd been empty.

With Kleppy carefully on the leadâwho knew what heâd find here?âshe walked along the side of the road where the crash had happened. The smells were driving Kleppy wild. He tugged to the place heâd been digging the night she and Raff had been here, but she pulled him away.

âNo wombat holes,â she told him. âSorry, Klep, but this trip is about me.â

She reached the foot of the crest. The road was incredibly narrow. The trees were hugeâthey were so close to the road.

Two cars colliding at speedâ¦ Theyâd never stood a chance.

She thought of that night. Of how theyâd been before. Five kids. Fledgling love affairs. The things theyâd all done.

Stupid kids, trying their wings. Theyâd been so sure they could fly. The only unknown was how far.

Theyâd been kids who thought they were invincible.

One stupid night.

She sank onto the verge at the side of the road and hugged her dog. âRaffâs right,â she whispered, the emotions of the past two days kaleidoscoping and merging into one clear vision. âTo forgiveâ¦ That means he was wrong; the rest of us were right. Thatâs how weâve acted and thatâs what heâs worn. Heâs accepted total blame.â

How hard must that have been?

A truck was approaching, slowly, a rattler. It came over the crest and slowed and stopped.

Lionel. Climbing out. Looking worried. âAre you okay?â he asked.

Then he saw Kleppy and Kleppy saw him. It was hard to say who was most delighted and it took a while before Lionel finally told her why he was here.

âI keep coming up hoping sheâs left the gate open,â Lionel told her. âMr Isaacâs daughter. Sheâs locked the place and I canât water the spuds. We were growing blue ones this year, just to see what theyâre like.â

âItâs a lovely garden.â

âIt was a lovely garden,â he said, sad again, and he gave

Kleppy a final hug and rose. âThe gateâs still shut?â

âYes.â

âIâd better slope off then,â he said sadly. âBack to the golf course.â He sighed and glanced towards the garden. âYou gotta put stuff behind you. Iâll be good at growing grass.â

âYou will, too.â

âI might go out to see Sarah some time,â he said diffidently. âYou be out there, too?â

âIâ¦probably not. Iâm not sure.â

âYouâre Sarahâs friend?â

âI am.â

âAnd the copperâs friend? Raff?â

âI hope so.â

âHeâs good,â Lionel said. âWhen I wanted to keep Kleppy he came to see my landlady; told her how much I wanted him. Didnât make any difference but he tried. I reckon a man like thatâs a friend.â

âHeâ¦he is.â

âAnd I bet heâs pleased Kleppyâs found you,â Lionel said, and he hugged Kleppy one last time and headed off back to his golf course.

She sat on the verge with her dog for a while longer. Letting her thoughts go where they willed.

She fiddled with the medal on Kleppyâs collar. Thought about Lionel. Thought about Isaac.

Isaac Abrahams was a brave man, she thought. Heâd been through so muchâand heâd gone through more for his dog.

And Raff?

Heâd faced condemnation from this community from the time he was a kid, and after Benâs death it had been overwhelming. Heâd been based in Sydney at the Police Training College when the accident happened. All heâd needed to do to escape censure was move Sarah into a Sydney apartment and never come back.

Heâd come back and faced condemnation because this was the place Sarah loved.

What you did for loveâ¦

She hugged her dog and looked at his collar and thought about what brave meant.

And what forgiveness was.

Tears were slipping down her cheeks now and she didnât care. These tears should have been cried out years ago, only sheâd shut them out, shut herself down, turned into someone who couldnât face pain.

Turned into someone she didnât like.

Could Raff like her?

In time. Maybe. If she changed and waited for a while.

But then she thought about the expression on his face as sheâd told him.

If I can forgive what happened with Benâ¦

How could she have said it? How could she be so hurtful?

Kleppy whined and squirmed and she hugged him tighter than he approved. She let him loose a little and he licked her from throat to chin. She chuckled.

âOh, Kleppy, I love you.â

Love.

The word hung out there, four letters, a concept huge in what it meant.

Love.

She whispered it again, trying it out for size. Thinking of all its implications. Love.

âI love Raff,â she told Kleppy, and Kleppy tried the tongue thing again.

âNo.â She set him down and rose, staring along the track where Ben had died. âI love you, Kleppy, but I love Raff more. Ben, I love Raff.â

Was it stupid to talk to a brother whoâd been dead for ten years? Who knew, and it was probably her imagination that a breeze rustled through the trees right then, a soft, embracing breeze that warmed her, that told her it was okay, that told her to follow her heart.

âJust as well,â she told her big brother in a tone she hadnât used for ten years. âYou always were bossy but you canât boss me out of this one. I love Rafferty Finn. I love Banksia Bayâs bad boy, and thereâs nothing you or anyone else can do to change my mind.â

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE sight of Wallace Baxterâs face as the Crown Prosecutor asked a seemingly insignificant question about a bank account in the Seychelles was priceless.

As Crown Prosecutor, Malcolm might be too tired to do hard research, but when something was handed to him on a plate he shed twenty years in twenty seconds. Raff slipped him a question with a matching document, and suddenly Malcolm was the incisive legal machine heâd once been.

Wallace Baxter was heading for jail. The people heâd ripped off might even be headed for compensation.

And thereâd be more, Raff thought with grim satisfaction. Raff had spent half an hour with Keith, poring through documents, listening to snatches of conversation, before Raff found the Seychelles document and they knew they had enough to pin Baxter.

They also suspected this was the tip of an iceberg. Philipâs tapes might have been intended for blackmail, or maybe they were simply a product of an obsessive mind, but they covered this case only, and thereâd been murky cases in the past. By the time Philip finished in court thereâd be forensic investigators on his doorstep, Raff thought with satisfaction. With search warrants.

Keith, though, was in charge at that end. He was calling for backup. Raffâs role was to return to court, focusing on this case only. So he listened to Malcolm ask his question and wave bank statements. He saw the moment Philip realised Abby had taken the wrong briefcase, and he watched his face turn ashen.

What had Philip been thinking, to record everything? Who knew? All he knew was that he was very, very pleased Abby was no longer marrying him.

He wanted to find her, but that was stupid. Wanting Abby had been stupid last night and it was stupid now.

He could leave the case to Malcolm now. He left. He should

go back to help Keithâbut he didnât. Instead, he stopped at the bakerâs to buy lamingtons. Sarahâs favourite. Theyâd sit in the sun and eat them, he thought. He needed to settle.

But when he got home he remembered Sarah was at the sheltered workshop on Mondays. What was he thinking, to forget that?

Maybe heâd been thinking about why he couldnât go find Abby.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Should he go back and help Keith?

Keith would do just fine without himâand for some reason he didnât want to see the grubby details of Philipâs profit-making. He didnât want to think about Philip.

Instead, he turned his attention to the garden. There was plenty here that needed doing. His grandmother would break her heart if she could see how heâd let it run down.

This was a gorgeous old house, but huge. There were four bedrooms in the main house and there was another smaller house at the rear where he and Sarah had lived with their mother before her death, to give them some measure of independence.

Sarah would like to live there now. She hankered for independence but she couldnât quite manage. She loved it here, though. To move awayâ¦

He couldnât, even if it meant spending his spare time mending and mowing and tending animals and feeling guilty because his grandmotherâs garden was now mostly grass.

And he was too close to Abby.

Do not go there, he told himself. He started tugging weeds, but thenâ¦

The sound of a car approaching tugged him out of his introspection.

Abby.

The car door opened and Kleppy flew to greet him as if he was his long lost friend, missing at sea for years, feared dead, miraculously restored to life. This was the new, renewed Kleppy, sure again of his importance in the world, greeting friends as they ought to be greeted.

He grinned and scratched Kleppyâs stomach as he rolled, and

Kleppy moaned and wriggled and moaned some more.

âI wish someone was that pleased to see me,â Abby said.

She was right by her car. She was smiling.

He couldnât roll on his back and wriggle but the feeling was similar.

Sheâd been crying. He could see it. He wantedâ¦he wantedâ¦

To back off. What sheâd saidâ¦ *If I can forgive what happened with Benâ¦* Heâd gone over it in his mind a hundred times and he couldnât get away from it.

He could not afford to love this woman.

âI came to apologise,â she said.

He stilled. Thought about it. Thought where it might be going and thought a man would be wise to be cautious.

âWhy would you want to apologise?â He rose. Kleppy gave a yelp of indignation. He grinned and scooped Kleppy up with him. Got his face licked. Didnât mind.

Abby was apologising?

âThe forgiveness thing,â she said, and he could see it was an effort to make her voice steady. âI didnât get it.â

âAnd now you do?â

She was standing beside her little red sports car and she wasnât moving. He didnât move either. He held her dog and he didnât go near.

Neutral territory between them. A chasmâ¦

âIâveâ¦changed,â she said.

He nodded, still cautious. âYou got rid of the diamond. Thatâs got to be a start.â

âIt wasnât the diamond. It was Kleppy. One dog and my life turns upside down.â

âHe hasnât ended you in jail.â

âNot yet.â

âHow much did you know about what was in Dexterâs briefcase?â

âWas there anything?â She couldnât disguise the eagerness. She didnât know, he thought with a rush of relief, though heâd already felt it. The Abby he once knew could never have collaborated with dishonesty. She hadnât changed so much.

Maybe she hadnât changed very much at all. This was the Abby he once knew, right here.

âThereâs enough to convict Baxter,â he said mildlyâthere was no need to go into the rest of it yetâand he watched the rush of relief.

âIâm so glad.â

âSo are a lot of people. Me included. Is that why youâre here? To find out?â

âNo. I told you. I came to say sorry.â

Sorry. What did that mean?

He couldnât help her. He knew she was struggling, but she had to figure for herself where she was going.

Abby.

He wanted to walk towards her and gather her up and claim her, right now. He ached to kiss away the tracks of those tears.

But he had to wait, to see if the figuring would come out on his side.

âKleppy and I have been up at Isaacâs,â she said. âWeâve been sitting on the road where Ben was killed.â

âMmm.â Nothing more was possible.

âWe were all dumb that night.â

âWe were.â Still he was neutral. He was having trouble getting a breath here. Abby took a deep breath for him.

âSarah and I were seventeen. You and Ben and Philip were nineteen. Iâd made my debut with Philip and you were mad at me. Sarah was mad at you, so she accepted a date with Philip to make you madder still. Ben was fed up with all of usâI think he wanted to go out with Sarah so he was fuming. Then the carâ¦ The rainâ¦ It would have been far more sensible to wait till the next weekend but Ben had to go back to uni so he was aching to try the car.â

âAbbyâ¦â

âLet me say it,â she said. âIâm still trying to figure this out for myself so let me say it as I see it now.â

âOkay.â What else was a man to say?

âMy dad came up here that afternoon and he was angry with Ben for spending the weekend here and not sitting in our living room giving Mum and Dad a minute by minute description of life at uni. So Dad didnât take any interest. He should have said, *Donât try the car until next weekend.* Or even offered to go with you and watch. And Sarahâ¦ I remember her trying on the dress Iâd just finished making for her, and your gran saying, âDonât

you crush that dress, Sarah, after all the time I spent ironing it.â And I was home, fed up with the lot of you.â

âSoâ¦â

âSo it was all justâ¦there,â she said. âPressure on you to drive on a night that wasnât safe. Excitement. Knowledge that no one used that track except loggers and no loggers worked over the weekend. Stupid kids and unsafe decisions and a slippery road, and pure bad luck. Sarah not wanting to crush her dress. Ben being too macho to wear a seat belt. Philip wanting to show off his car, his girlfriend. You werenât charged with culpable driving, Raff, and there was a reason. My parents took their grief out in anger. Their anger souredâ¦lots of things. It enveloped me and Iâve been too much of a wuss to fight my way out the other side.â

âAnd now you have?â It was a hard question to ask. It was a hard question to wait for an answer.

But it seemed she had an answer ready. âYou kissed me,â she said simply. âAnd it made me realise that I want you. I always have. That want, that need, got all mixed up, buried, subsumed by grief, by shock, by obligation. Iâve been a king-sized dope, Raff. It took one crazy dog to shake me out of it.â

The dog in question was passive now, shrugged against Raffâs chest. Raff set him down with care. It seemed suddenly important to have his arms free. âSo youâre sayingâ¦â

âIâm saying I love you,â she said, steadily and surely. âI know it seems fast. Weâve been apart for ten years so maybe I should gradually show you Iâve changed. But you know what? I canât wait. Iâve messed the last ten years up. Do I need to mess any more?â

He didnât move. He didnât let himself move. Not yet. There were things that needed to be said.

âYour parents hate me,â he said at last, because it was important. Hate always was.

âThey have a choice,â she said steadily now, and certain. Her eyes not leaving his. âThey can accept the man I love or not. Itâs up to them but it wonât stop me loving you. Iâll try and explain but if they wonât listenâ¦â She took a deep breath. âI canât live with hate any more, Raff, or with grief. I canât live under the shadow of a ten-year-old tragedy. You and meâ¦â She gazed round the disreputable farmyard. âYou and me, and Sarahâ¦â

And Sarah? She was going there?

Sheâd accept Sarah. He knew she would.

He could never leave Sarah. That fact had coloured every relationship heâd had since the accident, but this was the old Abby emerging, and it was no longer an issue. This was the Abby who held to her friendships no matter what, whoâd never stopped loving Sarah, the Abby with a heart so bigâ¦

So big she could ignore her parentsâ hatred?

So big she could take on the Finn boy?

And then he paused. Another vehicle was approaching, travelling fast. Its speed gave it a sense of urgency and he and Abby paused and waited.

It was a silver Porsche.

Philip.

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For ten years Abby had never seen Philip angry. Sheâd seen him irritated, frustrated, condescending. Sheâd always felt there was an edge of anger held back but sheâd never seen it.

She was seeing it now. His car skidded to a halt in a spray of gravel, and the hens clucking round the yard squawked and flew for cover. Kleppy dived behind her legs and stayed there.

Philip didnât notice the hens or Kleppy. He was out of the car, crashing the door closed, staring at her as if she were an alien species.

Raff was suddenly beside her. Taking her hand in his. Holding her against him.

Uh-oh.

She should pull away. Holding hands with Raff would inflame the situation.

She tugged but Raff didnât let her go. Instead, he tugged her tighter. His body language was unmistakable. My woman, Dexter. Threaten her at your peril.

How had it come to this?

âSo thatâs it,â Philip snarled, staring at the pair of them as if theyâd crawled from under Raffâs pile of weeds. âYou slut.â

âItâs not polite to call a lady a slut,â Raff said and his body shifted imperceptibly between them. âYou want to take a cold shower and come back when youâre cooler?â

âYou sabotaged the case,â Philip said incredulously, ignoring Raff. âThe bank accountsâ¦ Suddenly you leave, and my briefcaseâs gone and in comes Finn and the Prosecutor has a whole list of new evidence. *You gave it to Finn.*â

âBaxterâs a maw-worm,â Abby said, trying to shove Raff aside so she could face him. This was her business, not Raffâs. âI didnât know there was anything in your briefcase to convict him, but if there was we shouldnât have been defending him.â

âItâs what we do. Do you know how much his fee was?â

âWe can afford to lose it.â

âYou might.â He was practically apoplectic, and she knew why. Sheâd had the temerity to get between him and his money. Philip and his reputation. Philip and his carefully planned life.

âSo what about this?â He hauled the diamond out of his top pocket and thrust it towards her, but he was holding it tight at the same time. âDo you know how much this cost? Do you know how much Iâve done for you?â

âYouâve beenâ¦â How to say heâd been wonderful? He had, but right now it didnât seem like it.

âIâve sacrificed everything,â he yelled. âEverything. Do you think I wanted to practice in a dump like Banksia Bay? Do you know how much money I could have earned if Iâd stayed in Sydney? But here I am, doing the books of the Banksia Bay yacht club, stuck here, seeing the same people over and over, even mowing your parentsâ lawn.â

âI could never figure out why you offered to do that,â she whispered, but he wasnât listening.

âIâve done everything, and you throw it all away. For this?â His tone was incredulous. He was staring at Raff as if he were pond scum. âA Finn.â

âThereâs some pretty nice Finns,â she said mildly and Raff grinned and tugged her a little closer. Just a little, but Philip noticed.

âYouâd leave me for thisâ¦thisâ¦â

âFor Raff,â she said and she gazed steadily at Philip and she even found it in her to feel sorry for him. âIâm sorry, Philip, but Iâm not who you think I am. Iâve triedâ¦really hardâ¦to be what everyone wants me to be, but Iâve figured it out. Iâm not that person. Iâm Abby and I love bright clothes and sleeping in on

Sunday and I hate business dinners and I donât like spending my whole life in legal chambers. I like dogs andâ¦â

âDogs,â Philip snarled. The new, brave Kleppy with his brave new life had emerged from behind Abbyâs legs and was nosing round Philipâs feet, checking him out for smells. Philip looked down at him with loathing. âThatâs what this is about. A dog.â

âI know you donât like dogs,â Abby said. âIt was generous of you to say youâd take himâ¦â

âGenerous?â He gave a laugh that made her wince. âYeah. Iâd even put up with *that*.â The word made her know exactly what he thought of Kleppy.

âBecause you love me?â she asked in a small voice and Raffâs hand tightened around hers.

âLove.â Philip was staring at her as if sheâd lost her mind. âWhatâs love got to do with it?â

âIâ¦everything.â

âYou have no clue. Not one single clue. Enough. You and your parents have messed with my life for ten years. Thatâs it. Iâve paid a thousandfold. Iâm out of here, and if I never see this place again Iâll be delighted.â

He turned away, fast, only Kleppy was in the way. He tripped and almost fell. Kleppy yelped.

Philip regained his feet but Kleppy was still between him and his car. And suddenlyâ¦

âNo,â Raff snapped, but it was too late. They were both too late.

Philipâs foot swung back and he kicked. All the frustration and rage of the last two days was in that kick and Kleppy copped it all.

The little dog flew about eight feet, squealing in pain and shock.

âKleppy!â Abby screamed and ran for him, but Philip moved, too, heading for another kick. Abby launched herself at him, throwing herself down between boot and dog.

Philip grabbed her by the hair and hauled her backâ¦ And then suddenly he wasnât there any more. Raffâs body was between hers and Philipâs. Raffâs fist came into contact with Philipâshe didnât know where; she couldnât seeâbut she heard a sickening thud, she saw Philip lurch backwards, stumble, and she saw Raff follow him down.

He had him on the ground, on his stomach, his arm twisted up behind his back, and Philip was screamingâ¦

âLie still or Iâll really hurt you,â Raff said in a voice she didnât recognise. âAbby, the dogâ¦â

She turned back to Kleppy but Kleppy was no longer there.

Heâd backed away in terror. Whining. Horrified, she saw him bolt under the fence and into the undergrowth beyond.

He was yelping in pain and fear and he ran until he was out of sight.

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She couldnât catch him. Beyond Raffâs fence was Black Mountain. Wilderness.

âKleppy,â she yelled uselessly into the bushland, but he was gone.

She turned and stared back at Philip with loathing and distress. âYou kicked him.â

âHeâs a stray.â

âHeâs mine. I canât believeâ¦â She gulped and turned back to the fence, knowing to try and follow the little dog into the bush would be futile.

âHe was running,â Raff said. He was hauling Philip to his feet, none too gentle. âIf heâs running, he canât be too badly injured.â

âMoreâs the pity,â Philip snarled, and Raff wrenched him over to the Porsche with a ruthlessness Abby had never seen before. He shoved him into his driverâs seat like sheâd seen cops put villains into squad cars, only this was Philipâs car and he was sending him away.

Or not. Before Philip could guess what he intended, Raff grabbed the keys to Philipâs car and tossed them as far as he could, out into the bush.

âYouâve lost your keys,â he said conversationally. âAbby, get the handcuffs. Theyâre in the compartment on the passenger side of the patrol car.â

âWhatâ¦?â she said, and Raff sighed.

âYou want to hold your fiancÃ© or get the cuffs.â

âHeâs not my fiancÃ©.â It seemed important.

âSorry,â he said. âGet the cuffs, Abby.â Then, as she glanced

despairingly at the fence, he softened. âCuffs first. Kleppy second. Move.â

She moved and thirty seconds later Philip was cuffed to his own steering wheel.

âYou canât do this,â he snarled.

âWatch me,â Raff said. Then he lifted his radio. âKeith? You know we were getting a search warrant for Dexter, thinking it might be better to do it when he wasnât home? I have another suggestion. You come up to my place and pick him up. Heâs cuffed to the car in the driveway. He kicked a dog, pulled Abbyâs hair. Take him to the station, charge him with aggravated cruelty to animals, plus assault. Iâll be there with details when I can but meanwhile he stays in the cells. The paperwork could take quite some time.â

âYouâ¦â

âTalk among yourself, Dexter,â he said. âAbby and I have things to do. Dogs to rescue. And if I find heâs badly hurtâ¦â His look said it all. âCome on, Abby, letâs go. Heâll be headed for Isaacâs and I hope for all our sakes we find him.â

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They drove in silence. There was so much to say. On top of her fear for Kleppy, there was so much to think about. Philipâs invectiveâ¦

Philipâs words.

Iâve paid a thousandfold. It was a statement that made her foundations shift from under her.

She cast a look at Raff and his face was set and grim. Had he heard? Was he thinking about it?

Philipâ¦ But her thoughts kaleidoscoped back to Kleppy.

âHe canât be too badly hurt.â

âNo,â Raff said. âHe canât be. Heâs a dog whoâs given me my life back. I owe him more than putting Dexter behind bars.â

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Where? Where?

They reached Isaacâs place and it was fenced and padlocked as it had been fenced and padlocked since Isaacâs death.

All the way up the mountain sheâd held her breath, hoping

Kleppy would be standing at the gate, his nose pressed against the wire. He wasnât.

She called. They both called.

No Kleppy.

âWeâve come fast on the track,â Raff said. âKleppyâs having to manage undergrowth.â

âHe could be lost.â

âNot Kleppy. Our farm is on his route down to town from here, his route to his source of stolen goods. Heâll know every inch.â

âIf heâs hurt he could creep into the undergrowth andâ¦â

Raff tugged her tight and held her close. âHe was running,â he said. âIf heâs not here in ten minutes Iâll start bush bashing.â He tugged her tighter still and kissed her, hard and fast. Enormously comforting. Enormouslyâ¦right. âIf we donât have him in an hour Iâll organise a posse,â he said. âWeâll have an army of volunteers up here before nightfall.â

âFor Kleppy?â

âWe have two things going for us,â Raff said, and his smile was designed to reassure. âFirst, Kleppyâs one of Henriettaâs dogs. She hates having them put down. Sheâs over the moon that youâre taking him, and she has a team of volunteers sheâll have searching in a heartbeat. Second, if I happen to mention to about half this town that if we find an injured dog weâll put Dexter behind barsâ¦ How many raised hands do you reckon weâd get?â

âIs he that bad?â she said in a small voice.

âYou know he is.â

She did know it. The thought made her feelâ¦appalled.

What had she been thinking, to drift towards marriage? Sheâd been in a bad dream that had lasted for years. Of all the stupidâ¦

âDonât kick yourself,â Raff said. âWe all have dumb youthful romances.â

She tried to laugh. She couldnât. A youthful romance that lasted for ten years?

âI seem to remember I did have a youthful romance.â

âYeah,â he said. They were walking the perimeter now, checking. âI should have come home and been your partner at the deb ball.â

She did choke on that one. Her debutante ball. The source of all the trouble.

Sheâd been seventeen years old. A girl had to have a really cool partner for that.

Raff had been in Sydney. Sheâd been annoyed that he couldnât drive home twice a week to practice, two hours here, two hours back, just to be her partner. Of all the selfishâ¦

âDonât kick yourself,â he said again. âDexter does the kicking. Not us.â

âBut why?â It was practically a wail. Why?

Sheâd always assumed Philip loved her. Heâd given up Sydney, heâd come home, heâd been the devoted boyfriend, the devoted fiancÃ© for ten years.

Why, if he didnât love her?

âLetâs walk down to the road,â Raff said, taking her hand. He held her close, not letting her go for a moment as they walked down the driveway to the gravel road where their world had turned upside down ten years ago.

âKleppy?â she yelled and then paused. âDid you hear?â

âCall again.â

She did and there was no mistaking it. A tiny yelp, and then the sound of scuffling.

She was off the road and into the bush, with Raff close behind. Through the undergrowth. Pushing throughâ¦

And there he was. Kleppy.

Digging.

Philipâs kick had hit his side. She could see grazed skin and blood on his wiry coat.

He looked up from where heâd been digging and wagged his tail and she came close to bursting into tears. âKlepâ¦â

But he was back digging, dirt going in all directions. His whole body was practically disappearing into the hole he was creating.

âYou donât need a wombat,â she told him, feeling almost ill with relief. She reached him and knelt, not caring about the spray of dirt that showered her. âKlepâ¦â

He tugged back from inside his hole. He had something. He was trying to hold it in his mouth and front paws, tugging it up

as he tried to find purchase with his back legs.

She didnât care if it was a dead wombat, buried for years. She gathered him into her arms, mindful of his injured side, and lifted him from the hole.

He snuffled against her, a grubby, bleeding rapscallion of a dog, quivering with delight that sheâd found him and, better still, he had something to give her. He wiggled around in her arms and dropped his treasure onto the ground in front of her.

Raff was with her then, ruffling Kleppyâs head, smiling his gorgeous, loving smile that made her heart twist inside. How could she have ever walked away from this man for Philip? Like Kleppyâs buried treasure, his smile had been waiting for her to rediscover it.

She had rediscovered it.

She wasnât going to marry Philip. Raff was smiling at her. The thought made her feel giddy with happiness.

âHey,â Raff said in a voice that was none too steady and he gathered them both into his arms. He held them, just held them. His woman, with dog in between.

Happiness was right now.

But there was only so much happiness a small dog could submit to. He submitted for a whole minute before wriggling his nose free and then the rest of him. He started barking, indignation personified, because Abby hadnât taken any interest in his treasure.

Too bad. Raff was kissing her. She had treasure of her own to be finding.

But Kleppy was nothing if not insistent. He was hauling his loot up onto her knees. It was a dirt-covered box, a little damaged at one corner, but not much. It was pencil-box sized, or maybe a little bigger.

She took it and brushed the worst of the dirt offâand then she stilled.

This box.

Philipâs box.

No. Philipâs grandfatherâs box. He made boxes like this for all his relations, for all his friends.

This one, thoughâ¦ The shapeâ¦

Slowly now, with a lot more care, she dusted the thing off. It

was almost totally intact. Cedar did that. It lasted for generations. Something had nibbled at the corner but had given up in disgust.

Cedar was pretty much bug-proof. Obviously it tasted bad. Except to Kleppy.

It would have been the smell, she thought, the distinctive scent, showing him that something was buried here, something like the box he loved back at her place.

âWhat is it?â Raff was watching her face, figuring this was important.

âIâm not sure,â she said, hardly daring to breathe. A box. Made by Philipâs grandfather. Buried not fifty yards from where Ben had been killed.

A box she might just know.

Her fingers were suddenly trembling. Raff took the box from her. âA bomb?â There was the beginning of a smile in his voice.

âNo,â she whispered and then thought about it. âMaybe.â

âYou want me to open it?â

âI think we must.â

There were four brass clips holding it sealed. Raff flicked open each clip in turn.

He opened the box, but she knew before she saw it what its contents would be. And she was right. Sheâd seen it before. It held cassette tapes, filed neatly, slotted against each other in the ridged sections of Huon pine that Philipâs grandpa had carved with such skill.

She didnât need to take them out to know what they were. Music tapes, with a couple of blank ones at the back.

There was an odd one. Not slotted into place. The ribbon had been ripped from its base and the tape looked as if it had been tossed into the box in a hurry. It wasnât labelled.

Her mind was in overdrive.

What do you do when youâre panicking?

You grab the tape from the player, rip the ribbon out, throw it into the box with the others that might point to the fact that this tape might exist, and then you head into the bush. You bury it fast, deep in the undergrowth.

And then you come back to the car and you face the fact that a friend is dead and two others injuredâ¦

Even if you tried to find it later, you might not. Itâd take Kleppyâs sense of smellâ¦

But why?

âIâm guessing what this might be,â she said bleakly, and she knew she had to take this further. She was feeling sick. âDo you think we could still play it?â

âIt looks like itâs just a matter of reattaching the ribbon. Is it important?â

âI think it might be.â

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THEY took Kleppy to the vet and Fred declared heâd live. While he did, Raff made a quick call to Keith.

âDexterâs nicely locked up and heâs staying that way,â Keith said. âI have a team organised to swarm through his files. You look after Abby.â

âHow did he know you and Iâ¦?â Abby said and Raff grinned and shook his head.

âBanksia Bay. Donât ask.â

With his wound cleaned and dressed, they took Kleppy back to Raffâs. An hour later, a hearty meal demolished, Kleppy was watching television with Sarah. Lionel was with them. Heâd just sort of turned up.

âHeard Kleppy got kicked,â he muttered, and Abby thought, *How does this town do it?*

Abby and Raff were in the back room, standing over Granâs ancient tape player. Waiting for a repaired cassette to start.

Abby felt sick.

Raff was curious. Worried. Watching her. She hadnât told him what to expect. It might not be anything.

But why was it buried there if it wasnât anything?

And as soon as it started she knew she was right, at least in thinking she knew what it was.

Sheâd watched Philip over the years as heâd recorded his client discussionsââin case I miss somethingâ. Sheâd attributed it to his meticulous preparation.

Sheâd believed him, all those years ago when sheâd found the Christabelle tape. Sheâd used it as a reason to break up with him, but had hardly thought any more of it. But in the box buried by the roadside where Ben diedâ¦there was more evidence.

Maybe Philip taped all his girlfriends.

For this was Sarah, ten years younger but still unmistakably herself. Young and excited and a little bit nervous.

It had been set to record as soon as Philip picked her up, and they knew immediately it was the night of the crash. They listened to Sarah asking if they could go up the mountain and see if the boys had their car going.

âSure.â Philip was amenable. âI wouldnât count on it going, though. Letâs show âem what a real car can do. You like my wheels?â

âYour carâs great.â But even from the distance of ten years they could hear Sarahâs increasing nervousness, from almost as soon as they started driving. âPhilip, slow down. These curves are dangerous.â

âI can handle them. Itâs Raff and Ben who should worry. They can hardly drive.â

More talk. Sarah asked if he liked her dress. Even then, Philip wasnât into bright dresses.

âNot so much. Whyâd it have to be red?â

A terse response. Sarah sounded peeved.

âMovies afterwards?â Philip asked.

âIâm not sure. If you donât like my dress senseâ¦â

âThereâs no need to be touchy.â

Silence. An offended huff? Then Sarah againâ¦

âPhil, be careful. That was a wallaby.â

âItâs fine. Wallabies are practically plague round here, anyway. Why are they using the fire track?â

âThey canât go on the roads. Their car isnât registered.â

âThat hunk of junkâll never get registered. Not like this baby. Watch it go.â

âPhilip, no. Slow down. Youâre scaring me. Thereâll be more wallabiesâitâs getting dark.â

âThereâs nothing to be scared of. You reckon theyâre on this track?â

âPhilipâ¦ Philip, no. You nearly hit itâ¦â And thenâ¦ âYouâre on the wrong side of theâ¦â

âThereâs ruts on the other side. No one uses this.â

âBut itâs a crest.â Her voice rose. âPhilip, itâs a crest. Noâ¦â Thenâ¦awfulness.

Then nothing. Nothing, nothing and nothing.

The tape spun on into silence.

Dear Godâ¦

Raff changed colour. Held onto the back of the nearest chair.

She moved then, closing the distance between them in a heartbeat, linking her arms around his chest and tugging him to her. She held him and held him and held him. Sheâd had some inkling, the moment sheâd seen the buried box. But Raffâ¦ This was a lightning bolt.

Raffâ¦

Heâd been her hero since she was eight years old. He was her wonderful Raff.

Her love.

âI didnâtâ¦â he said, and it was as if he was waking from a nightmare. âI believed Philip. He said I was on the wrong side.â

âThatâs why there was never a court case,â she whispered. âThe storm hit just as the crash happened. There was only Philipâs word.â

Theyâd believed him. Theyâd all believed him. It had been so hardâso unthinkableâto do anything else.

She saw it all.

Philipâs stupidity had killed Ben; had desperately injured Sarah. He couldnât admit it, but what followedâ¦

Some part of Philip was still decent. He was a kid raised in Banksia Bay, and heâd been their friend in childhood. His parents were friends with her parents. Theyâd loved Ben to bits.

Heâd have been truly appalled.

So a part of him had obviously decided to do the âright thingâ, and in his eyes he had. Heâd come back here to practice law, playing the son to her parents, devoting himself to Banksia Bay as Ben would have.

âHeâs been making amends for Ben,â she said, and she was trying hard to hold back the anger. Raff didnât need her anger now. He just neededâ¦her? âHe came back and tried to make amends to us all.â

And then, despite what sheâd intended, anger hit, a wave so great it threatened to overwhelm her. âNo. Not to us all. He tried to make amends to me and to my parents. He would have married me, as if that somehow made up for Benâs life. But to youâ¦ For ten years heâs let you think you were responsible. For ten years heâs let you hold the blame.â

Tears were coursing down her cheeks now. Sheâd thought she was comforting Raff but her rage was so great there was no

comfort she could give. If Philip walked in the door right nowâ¦

âIâll tear his heart out,â she stammered. âIf he has a heart. I canât bear it. Heâs lost you years.â

âNo.â

Raff put her back from him then, holding her hard by each shoulder. Heâd regained his colour and, unbelievably, he was smiling. âI believe you told me you loved me before you found this tape.â

âYes, butâ¦â

âThen itâs Philip whoâs lost the ten years. Iâve faced it and come out the other side.â He took a deep breath. âWhew. This takes some getting used to.â

âWe can tell the world. Oh, Raffâ¦ I canât bear anyone thinking a moment longer that youâ¦â

âThat I was dumb as a teenager? I *was* dumb,â he said gently. âI shouldnât have been up there that night. None of us should. I believe I might even cut Philip slack on this one.â

âNo!â

âHeâs lost you,â Raff said and he tugged her against him and let his chin rest on her hair. âWinner takes all. Thatâd be me. And I need to think things through before I do anything rashâlike spreading this far and wide.â

She stared at him as if he were out of his mind. âWhy on earthâ¦?â

âYou know, my reputation does no end of good for my street cred,â he said, thoughtful now. âHow many local kids know the local cop was dumb and someone died because of it? You get experts lecturing kids on speed and they shrug it off. They see how Mrs Fryer treats me? For a cop, thatâs gold. I reckon itâs even saved lives.â

âRaffâ¦â

âDonât think itâs not important,â he said, laughter fading. He was holding her at armâs length and meeting her gaze with gravity and truth. âTo look at Sarah now and know I wasnât responsible for her painâ¦ To look at you and know it wasnât me who hurt youâ¦ I canât tell you what that means. But Philip has some pretty heavy stuff coming to him anyway. I can cope without my own pound of flesh. Believe me, I can cope.

âAll I need I have right here. This tape is a great gift, Abby, but the greatest gift of all is you.â

He tugged her to him then, and he held her, close enough so their heartbeats merged. She was dissolving into him, she thought. She loved this man with all her heart. No matter what he decided to do about this tape, they could go forward from this moment.

âMarry me,â he said and the world stood still.

âMarry?â She could barely get the word out.

âI hear on the grapevine you have a perfectly good wedding dress. Iâm a man who hates waste.â

âRaffâ¦â

âDonât quibble,â he said sternly. âJust say yes.â

âYouâre in shock. Youâre emotional. You need time to think.â

He put her away from him again. Held her at armâs length. Smiled.

âIâve thought,â he said. âMarry me.â

âOkay.â

Â

Okay? As an acceptance of a marriage proposal it lacked a certain finesse but it was a great start. For a lawyer. He found himself laughing, a great explosion of happiness that came from so far within heâd never known that place existed. He lifted her up in his arms and whirled her round as if she weighed nothing.

She did weigh nothing. She was part of himâhis Abby, his love.

Hisâ¦wife?

He set her down, laughter fading. Joy was taking its place, a joy so great he felt he was shedding an old skin and bursting into something new.

She tilted her chin and he kissed her, so slowly, so thoroughly satisfactorily, that words werenât possible. Words werenât needed for a very long time.

Â

She held him tight, she kissed him and she placed her future in his hands. She loved him so much she felt her heart could burst.

He was Banksia Bayâs bad boy no longer. He was justâ¦ Raff.

If he insisted, then maybe she wouldnât tell the town about Philip, she concededâbut she would tell her parents. And she

would tell Philip that she knew. And thenâ¦ This was Banksia Bay. If things got aroundâ¦ Things always got around.

But right now it was becoming incredibly hard to care. All she cared about was that Raff was holding her as if heâd never let her go. He was kissing her as heâd kissed her when she was sixteen, only more so. A lot more so. He was grown into her man. He was her love, for ever and ever.

âI canât believe this is happening,â he said at last in a voice that was changed, different. It was the voice of a man who was walking into a future heâd never dreamed of. âAbby, are you sure?â And then he hesitated. âI do need to care for Sarah.â There was sudden doubt.

âI believe thereâs room enough here for all of us,â she said, deeply contented. She pulled back enough to peep through to the next room, where Lionel and Sarah were watching television. They were covered in three dogs, two cats and a vast bowl of popcorn. They were lookingâ¦self-conscious. On closer inspectionâ¦ They were holding hands.

âThere must be something in the water,â she said and grinned, and Raff tugged her close again, smiling wide enough to make her dissolve in the happiness of his smile.

âSo youâd take us all on? This place. And Sarahâs dogs and guinea pigs and hens and ponies andâ¦â

âAnd whoever else comes along,â she said, and chuckled at the look on his face.

He caught his breath. âYouâdâ¦â

âI think I would,â she said, a bubble of joy rising so fast it was threatening to overwhelm her. âIt might be fun.â

âYouâre talking babies,â he said, feeling his way.

âI believe I am. You know,â she said thoughtfully, âif we sold my place we could even do up your other house as well as this one.â

He took a deep breath. Looked through to the sitting room. Saw what she was seeing. Sarah and Lionelâ¦

âWe might just have found ourselves a gardener,â Abby said, smiling and smiling.

Enough. This was going so fast he was being left behind. A man had to take a stand some time, so he took his stand right there. Right then. A simple *okay* was not satisfactory for what he had in mind. He dropped to one knee. âAbigail Callahan, will

you marry me?â

âIâve already saidâ¦â she started.

âYou said *okay*. I donât think *okay*âs legally binding.â

âYou want me to prepare contracts?â

âIn triplicate.â

She smiled down at him, for how could she help it? She smiled and smiled. And then she thought this moment called for gravitas. It was a Very Serious Moment. It was the beginning of the rest of her life.

She stepped back and stood a little way away, looking down at him. At all of him.

At this man whoâd be her husband.

She could still see him, she thought. The spiky-haired ten-year-old who her eight-year-old self had fallen in love with. That dangerous twinkleâ¦

Her bad boy.

Her love.

âIf I turn out to be a sewing mistress instead of a lawyerâ¦â she ventured.

âSuits me.â

âIf Iâm not struck off the professional roll for this morningâs unprofessional conduct I might help out the Crown Prosecutor from time to time.â

âYou canât get struck off for dropping a briefcaseâand Malcolm surely needs some help. You know, Iâm feeling a bit dumb, kneeling over here when youâre over there.â

She hadnât finished. âI do want babies.â

âHow many?â he asked and there was a trace of unease in his voice.

âSix,â she said, and laughed at the look on his face.

âCan we try one out for size first?â

âSounds a plan. Raffâ¦â

âYes, my love?â

âThatâs just it,â she said, feeling suddenlyâ¦shy. âMy love. Let me sayâ¦ I need to explain. Only once and then itâs over, but I do need to get it out. Raff, Iâve loved you all the time without stopping but my pain stopped me thinking with my heart. I forced myself to think with my head. Thatâs done. Iâm so, so sorry that I canât take back those ten years.â

âHush,â he said.

âI have to say it.â

âYouâve said it,â he murmured. âI donât like to mention it but thereâs no carpet here. Iâm kneeling on wood. I didnât have the forethought to use a cushion. Any more quibbles?â

âNo, butâ¦â

He sighed. âThen how about saying youâll marry me and taking me out of my pain?â

âOkay.â

âAbigail!â

She laughed, and she hardly felt herself cross the distance between them. She knelt to join him and he tugged her close.

He kissed her again, so thoroughly, so wonderfully that doubts, unhappiness, emptiness were gone and she knew they were gone for ever.

âWe canât take back those ten years,â he whispered into her hair as the kiss paused before restarting. âHow about we give ourselves the next ten instead?â

âTenâ¦â

âAnd the ten after that. And after that, too. Decades and decades of love and family andâ¦â

And something was bumping against her leg.

Kleppy. He was tugging the popcorn bowl to his mistress with care.

She giggled and lifted him up and popcorn went flying. Heâd tugged it with such care and sheâd spilled it.

Who cared? A lawyer might. Not Abigail Callahan. Not the wife of Banksia Bayâs Bad Boy.

âDecades and decades of love and family and dogs,â she said, and Raff took Kleppy firmly from her and set him down so he could kiss her again.

âDefinitely, my love. Definitely family, definitely dogs, definitely love. For now and for ever. For as long as we both shall live. So now, Abigail Callahan, for the third and final time, will you marry me? I want more than *okay*. I want properly, soberly, legally, and with all your heart.â

âWhy, yes, Rafferty Finn,â she managed between love and laughter. âWhere would you like me to sign?â

Abby didnât wear two thousand beads to her wedding.

For a start, it didnât seem right that she wear a dress sheâd prepared for her marriage to Philip. Almost as soon as Raff put a ring on her finger she was planning an alternative. Rainbows.

So Sarah wore her dressâSarah, whoâd looked at her dress of two thousand beads and burst into tears. âItâs the most beautiful thing Iâve ever seen.â And Sarah needed a wedding gown.

For: âLionelâs not staying in that horrid boarding house a minute longer,â she declared, but Lionel was old-fashioned. He was delighted to move to Raffâs farm; he was incredibly happy to start renovating the little house at the rear, but heâd marry his Sarah first.

They were even thinkingâ¦if Lionel got his money back from Philipâ¦Isaacâs place wasnât so far from the farm. Maybe they could be even more independent.

So Raff gave his sister away. Abby was maid of honour and if she was as weepy as any mother of the bride then who could blame her? Her gown of two thousand beads had found a use she could hardly have dreamed of.

And then it was Abbyâs turn for her wedding, a month later, but on a day just as wonderful. They were to be married in the churchâthe church sheâd been baptised in, the church Ben had been buried from.

Half Banksia Bay came to see. Even Mrs Fryer.

For things had shifted for the townâs bad boy.

Rumours were flying. True to his word, Raff refused to make public the contents of the tape, but the people of Banksia Bay never let lack of evidence get in the way of a good rumour. And there were plenty of pointers saying Raff might well have been misjudged.

For a start, Abbyâs parents were trying their best to get to know Raff, and suddenly they wouldnât hear a bad word against him. They even offered to move into Raffâs house while Raff and Abby went on their honeymoon, in case Lionel needed help with Sarah.

And people remembered. Raff had been judged on Philipâs word and nothing else. But nowâ¦ Philip had abandoned the town and moved to Sydney. He was facing malpractice charges

and more.

Philipâs parents were appalled. They owned an apartment in Bondi and rumour said they were thinking of moving themselves, leaving Banksia Bay to be with their son.

They were the only ones behind Philip, though. Even Philipâs grandpa was right here at the wedding. What was more, at Abbyâs tentative request heâd made a beautiful box for the ring bearer.

The ring bearerâ¦

Raff stood before the altar waiting for his bride and he couldnât help thinking the choice of ring bearer might be a mistake.

Abby swore itâd be okay. Sheâd spent hours training him. The plan was for her mother to hold Kleppy, and then, when Raff called, heâd trot across, bearing the ring. What could possibly go wrong?

Who knew, but Raff organised for Keith to carry a backup ring in his pocket. It wasnât that he didnât trust Kleppy.

Umâ¦yes, it was. He stood in the church waiting for his bride and he thought he definitely didnât trust Kleppy.

But suddenly he could no longer focus on Abbyâs dog. The doors of the church swung open and Abby was right there. Holding her fatherâs hand. Looking along the aisle to find him.

His bride. His Abby.

Sheâd wanted rainbows, and that was what she was to be married in. Sheâd made this herself as well, and it was as individual as she was. The gown was soft white silk, almost transparent, floating over panels of pastel hues, every shade a man could imagine. Her tight-fitting bodice clung to her lovely figure and the skirt flared out in clouds of shimmering colour, with the soft-coloured silk shimmering from underneath.

She was so beautifulâ¦

She wore her hair simply, no longer in the elegant chignon heâd hated for years, but dropping in tendrils to her bare shoulders. She wore a simple halo of fresh flowers in her hairâand she took his breath away.

Sarah followed her in, proud fit to burst. Matron of honour. She wore a matching dress, also rainbow-coloured but without the translucent overskirt that made Abby seem to float.

Sarah was also supposed to be wearing a ring of flowers in her hair, but that had been the one hiccup of the morning. âIt might give me a headache,â sheâd said, doubtful.

âWhy donât you take it and leave it in the car?â Raff had suggested. âThat way, you can wear it for the official photographs and take it off if it starts hurting.â

Sheâd approved his suggestion. She was happy now, bareheaded, beautiful, a married woman, fussing over her best friendâs gown.

She wasnât as happy as Raff. Not possible. His Abby was smiling at him. His Abby was about to be his wife.

What could be more perfect?

The music filled the church. Abbyâs father led her forward, beaming with pride, and Raff stepped forward to receive his bride.

His Abby.

What could go wrong with today?

Kleppy could go wrong.

There was a scuffle in the front pew. Abbyâs mother had retired behind her handkerchief and forgotten her Kleppy-clutching duty. She made a wild grab but it was too late: he was free.

Kleppy was groomed to an inch of his life. He was wearing a bow of the same rainbow-coloured fabric lining Abbyâs gown.

He was off and running.

He trotted straight up the aisle, tail high, a dog on a missionâand he disappeared out of the door.

Uh-oh. What was a cop supposed to do now? What was a groom supposed to do?

âLeave him to me,â Keith growled, setting a hand firmly on Raffâs shoulder. âLights and sirens. Handcuffs. Padded cell if necessary. Iâll pull him in no time.â

âKleppy,â Abby faltered.

âYou two get on with your wedding,â Keith told them, and they looked at each other and knew they must. A hundred people were watching them. These people loved them and they were waiting to see them married.

âBut he has the ring,â Abby faltered.

âWe have backup,â Keith said and handed Raff the spare.

âOh, Raffâ¦â He could tell she didnât know whether to be thankful or indignant.

âItâs not that I didnât trust him,â Raff saidâunconvincinglyâand then he paused.

Kleppy was back. With a ring.

He had two rings now, the plain band of gold in the tiny box hanging round his neckâand Sarahâs halo of flowers, left on the front seat of the bridal carriage.

It was a ring of fresh flowers to match Abbyâs.

He carried it straight to Abby and sat and wagged his tail and waited to be told how good he was.

âHeâs brought us a ring,â Abby said and choked.

The congregation was choking as wellâor laughing out loud. Kleppyâs reputation had grown considerably in the last couple of months.

But Raff had his priorities in order now. There were things to be done before he acknowledged his soon-to-be wifeâs dog. He took her hands in his, tugged her to face him and lightly kissed her. âYou,â he told her, âare the most beautiful woman in the world.â

âYou make my toes curl,â she said.

There was a light âharrumphâ from before them. They were, after all, here to get married.

Raff smiled and stooped and held out his hand, and Kleppy laid his ring of flowers into his palm. He lifted it up and gave it to Abby.

âI guess this is Kleppyâs wedding gift.â

âIâll treasure it for always,â she managed.

âYou should. For with this ring, I thee wed,â he said softly. âWith this dog, I thee marry. Before this community, with these friends, I pledge you my troth.â

There was a murmur of delighted approval.

Abby was lookingâ¦in love.

Kleppy, however, was still looking expectant.

Raff knelt and lifted the small gold band from the box around Kleppyâs neck. He pocketed it carefullyâand then he placed the ring of flowers around Kleppyâs neck.

âSarah,â he said to his sister. âCan you hold Kleppy? I have things to do.â

âSure,â Sarah said, beaming. âLionel will help me.â

So Sarah and Lionel held Kleppy. Raff took Abbyâs hands in his and he faced herâa man facing his woman on their wedding day.

âEnough,â he said softly, for her ears alone. âDogs have their place, as do sisters and friends and flowers. But for nowâ¦ Are you ready to marry me?â

âIf youâll take me. And my crazy dog.â

âWeâll take whatever comes with both of us,â he told her, strongly and firmly. âAs long as we have each other.â

âOh, yes.â She smiled at him mistily through tears. He kissed her again, lightly on the lipsâand then the ceremony began as it was meant to begin. As Rafferty Finn and Abigail Callahan stood together, in peace and in love, to become one.

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ABBY AND THE BACHELOR COP

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